



JACKSON RESET

**A ROADMAP FOR MOVING FROM CRISES TO
REBUILDING AND RECOVERY—AND HOPE**

By Richard C. Harwood



The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation is a non-profit, nonpartisan organization that equips people, organizations, communities, and networks with the tools to bridge divides, tackle shared challenges, create a culture of shared responsibility, and build local capacities. The Harwood Institute's work is rooted in a philosophy of Civic Faith and the practice of Turning Outward. Founded in 1988, the Institute's approach has spread to all 50 states across the US and 40 countries around the world.



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INTRODUCTION

With Jackson in the grips of profound and compounding crises and stress—when trauma is both acute and chronic—how can the community *fix* things? Given the sheer magnitude of the challenges and crises at play—and the rising noise of people arguing over what to do—this question can seem overwhelming. Where to start?

But here's a different question: What steps can Jackson, and other communities, proactively take to rebuild and recover—and regain hope? This question opens the way to a more practical, doable path forward.

Perhaps more than any other U.S. community, Jackson has been pummeled by one crisis after another in recent years. These crises have only added to long-standing challenges that have set the community back. Running harder and faster will not lift Jackson out of its troubles.

Nor will relying on being “resilient.” While the community can take pride in its recent and past resiliency, more is needed. More is wanted. Being resilient means getting knocked down and getting back up—sometimes repeatedly. But it doesn’t necessarily mean that any of the underlying conditions of people’s lives, or the larger community, have changed. Sadly, it can mean the persistence of unwanted challenges.

Jackson is in need of a fundamental reset. Simply finding ways to get through each new crisis is not enough. The community must move from a focus on crises and survival to rebuilding and recovery. It must find greater hope for its future. This roadmap lays out three key pillars in making this reset:

- Build on the Good
- Change How the Work Gets Done
- Center the Human Spirit

The key here is for Jackson to focus on its **civic culture** at every step. In my 35 years of work leading The Harwood Institute, I have found that strong civic culture is the biggest driver of how communities work and whether they thrive.

To strengthen civic culture, Jackson must rebuild its civic norms, develop leaders and organizations that are turned outward to the community, create new networks for innovation and working together, and generate a greater sense of shared purpose. Only then can Jackson truly create a new trajectory of hope.



JACKSON RESET

TACKLE INEQUITIES AND DISPARITIES

BUILD ON THE GOOD	CHANGE HOW THE WORK GETS DONE	CENTER THE HUMAN SPIRIT
<p>Emphasize the value of Jackson's culture and assets</p> <p>Tap into community pride and innate strength</p> <p>Make more room for young people's energy and wisdom</p>	<p>Give each other permission to proactively rebuild Jackson</p> <p>Make rebuilding trust an intentional focus</p> <p>Weave communities and resources together</p> <p>Stop going it alone and work together to deliver on shared promises</p> <p>Create and share believable signs of progress that give people hope</p>	<p>Generate a can-do narrative</p> <p>Grow belief</p> <p>Honor and protect human dignity</p>

THE BOTTOM FALLING OUT

In the summer of 2019, twenty-five community leaders came together for a daylong meeting at The Two Mississippi Museums to discuss their aspirations and concerns for Jackson, and what it would take to move the community forward. The discussion, together with findings from in-depth interviews of the attendees, resulted in *Jackson Ready: A New Civic Covenant to Step Forward*.

The attendees said that Jackson has a rich history—a history that many people take great pride in, but also lament. There is a complicated, deeply layered, and ever-unfolding story of seemingly intractable challenges of race and class. These challenges are intertwined with a host of social, political, and economic concerns.

Jackson has a rich history—a history that many people take great pride in, but also lament.

At the time, negativity and mistrust persisted in the community. Concrete action and follow-through were missing, leading many to frustration and anger. There was widespread lack of coordination between groups and organizations, burnout among civic leaders, and political logjams.

Still, many of the community leaders said that Jackson had a record of resilience. People here bounce back quickly when bad things happen. Amid a rash of challenges, palpable optimism remained.

In a Public Innovators Lab that The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation and the Community Foundation for Mississippi held in July 2020, community participants expressed even stronger optimism about Jackson. While COVID-19 had hit the nation in March, Jackson was responding; George Floyd's murder on May 25 was met with subsequent rallies and meaningful conversations held throughout the city, often led by young, energetic Jacksonians. Notwithstanding turmoil across the country and persistent infrastructure and other community problems, Lab participants were increasingly optimistic that Jackson was finally moving in a good direction.

But then the bottom fell out.

Beyond the initial wave of COVID-19, the community was hit harder than most by the Omicron and Delta variants. One conflict after another over garbage collection piled up. Numerous water crises left people, businesses and local institutions without safe drinking water, and sent thousands of kids out of school and back home, placing enormous stress on youth and families. Political gridlock hit new heights. The state of Mississippi, at best, often seemed indifferent to the plight of Jackson; at worst, downright punitive.



These crises deepened and exacerbated existing inequities and disparities, including divisions along race and racism, health and education, safety, and housing, among others. Neighborhoods within areas such as West and South Jackson have been hit particularly hard. Gaps in the city are widening and deepening.

These views were consistently expressed in the spring of 2023, when The Harwood Institute re-interviewed many of the attendees who met at the Two Mississippi Museums, along with additional individuals. When we held a series of roundtables in August, 2023, we heard similar sentiments once more.

Community leaders also told us that a series of fault lines hinder people from coming together and taking effective action.

- ❯ **Community Divides**—from race to neighborhoods, from religious divisions to generational differences, to conflicts between the city and state.
- ❯ **Civic Fragmentation**—organizations, groups, and leaders are increasingly operating in their own lanes, hardening the fragmentation and narrow, parochial interests in the community.
- ❯ **Mistrust**—profound and pervasive mistrust envelops the community, at every level.
- ❯ **Lack of Shared Purpose**—while many people may hold common aspirations for Jackson and their lives, those interviewed say that “we can’t get out of our own way” to productively work together.

The people of Jackson are fatigued. Some are overwhelmed. Many find themselves at a breaking point. As for community leaders, some are reluctant to step forward and lead as they fear pushback, recriminations, and name-calling.

Scanning the local landscape, one community leader urgently told us: “Enough is enough. This is just too crazy. It’s just too crazy.”



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A ROADMAP FOR REBUILDING AND RECOVERY

There is a way forward.

The twenty-five community leaders were quick to point to concrete areas they hoped would turn into signs of progress for Jackson, including the efforts being led by the federally-appointed water manager, strides being made by Jackson Public Schools, activity within different neighborhoods, and the collective response by the community to the most recent garbage crisis. They emphasized time and again the community's remarkable resiliency. Many enthusiastically highlighted the vast and varied assets of Jackson.

To leverage these signs of progress, a reset is needed.

These interviews—combined with The Harwood Institute's experience working with Jackson and in communities across the U.S.—point to a roadmap for rebuilding and recovery, made up of three key pillars: Build on the Good; Change How the Work Gets Done; Center the Human Spirit.

Making progress will require an unrelenting focus on bringing these three pillars to life.

1

BUILD ON THE GOOD

Emphasize the value of Jackson's culture and assets.

People both inside and outside of Jackson often talk about the community's persistent problems and deficits; the story is one of a community destined for despair and failure. But Jackson has an abundance of assets to both celebrate and build upon. Indeed it is seldom that the Institute interviews community leaders who so readily and consistently name so many assets. People point to strong cultural and higher education institutions; they speak endearingly of the history and development of Jackson's music and food culture. They celebrate newer investments in community assets like trails. Said one community leader: "There's just a whole host of really strong and effective creative work going on in the city." This is both part of Jackson's historical and current identity—and Jackson's future.

Tap into community pride and innate strength.

When searching for renewed energy and resources, people in communities typically look to the outside world; but Jackson has an enduring source of energy right at home. This was, in part, the basis of the recent 200jxn citywide celebration initiative. Community leaders in virtually every interview talked about Jacksonians' strength, scrappiness, and pride.

"You can see Jackson pride within Jackson. People are really starting to embrace the Jacksonness," one community leader said. Another noted, "There are a lot of citizens in the community who want the best for Jackson and who are committed to trying to overcome the barriers." These community leaders believe Jackson has what it takes to overcome adversity. Echoing others in our interviews, one community leader put it this way, "There's a resilience that exists within the citizens of Jackson that is a tremendous asset."

Make more room for young people's energy and wisdom.

Throughout the interviews, community leaders spoke about the need to more proactively rely on the voices, aspirations, creativity and energy of younger Jacksonians. Some talked about school-aged students, others about those attending local higher ed institutions, and still others about those in their 30s and 40s, many of whom are starting young families. "The dispositions of young folks see all possibilities in the world. They've been hit in the stomach before and had to get back up," one community leader said. Another said, "Young people are just always so positive, and they just don't get caught up in a lot of the negativity." Indeed, people talked over and over again about young people's creativity and their ability to work across differences. But relying on young people more will require that older generations both bring their own knowledge to the table and make room for younger people's new ideas and ways of doing things.

2

CHANGE HOW THE WORK GETS DONE

Give each other permission to proactively rebuild Jackson.

In times of crisis, many people throughout the city have stepped forward in selfless ways and without many resources to support one another. And while the community has fought hard just to survive, it must now focus more explicitly and intentionally on rebuilding and recovery. "We are in a trough right now. Recovery has to be the main goal," one community leader observed. A key to moving forward is to find ways for willing Jacksonians to come together from across various communities and divides to focus on rebuilding and recovery. This will take a different way of working together. It will also take giving each other permission—and cover—to step forward and engage. "Rebuild and recovery are two powerful words. Rebuild tells you that something was there before, but it needs to be either strengthened or made new. Recovery means there's been some kind of trauma that something needs to be back from or be healed."

Make rebuilding trust an intentional focus.

People's trust in Jackson has been broken so many times and by so many broken promises over the years. Mistrust is deep and pervasive. Trust in leaders of all kinds is in short supply. Residents often don't trust each other across various communities and divides. There is distrust of outside funders and groups that come to town to do work. Yet trust is needed for Jackson to rebuild and recover. "Trust building and creating

spaces for safe conversation is the bedrock of rebuilding and recovery," a community leader said. Everything that is done moving forward must pay special attention to building trust between and among people. This is not only about looking forward, but about addressing the very causes of mistrust in the first place.

Weave communities and resources together.

Different community leaders described Jackson in different ways, with some saying it is fragmented, while others saying it is a community of different communities. "The core issue is that we are not one people. Whether you call yourself red or blue, white or Black, we don't see our futures connected in a positive way." Another community leader described Jackson in this way: "Within Jackson there are multiple communities. I would actually describe Jackson as a container within which multiple communities exist." Notwithstanding different ways to describe Jackson, almost all of the community leaders spoke about the need for the community to pull together. "The only way we're going to be able to pull out of this tailspin is to function as one culture with different faces." What's more, people believe Jackson must find ways to marshal shared resources. "I wonder how we bring all of our resources together to really make the kind of impact we need."

Stop going it alone and work together to deliver on shared promises.

A common theme throughout the interviews was that Jackson's political, civic and faith leaders must get beyond finger pointing, protecting their turf, and working in their own areas. "People are constantly working against each other," one community leader said. Another said, "Everybody's just out there going it alone in their singular lane, focused on their mission, their board, whatever the deal is," a community leader told us. What has developed in Jackson is that few leaders transcend existing community boundaries. "Sometimes, if one community really trusts you, that is license for another part of the community not to trust you," a community leader pointed out. The clear answer: "To build Jackson, we've got to have people who are willing to work together —to sit down, negotiate, communicate and put all the differences aside." What's more, people must deliver on their promises. "What discourages people is when nothing gets done, when you attend meetings and you hear all this great information, and you hear what's going to happen, but then there's no follow-through."

Create and share believable signs of progress that give people hope.

"For a long time, we were looking for this one thing that was going to change the whole community. This one project would just turn everything around," one community leader told us. "But it's going to take a lot of different projects, small things, that come together to really recover and rebuild in all segments of the community." These include: real demonstrations that people are working together differently; progress is being made on the water challenge; the public library is getting back up on its feet; investments from various national foundations are being leveraged to address what really matters to people; neighborhood-based actions are continuing to grow. On their own, such efforts will not address the magnitude of challenges

confronting Jackson, but they will put Jackson on a more hopeful trajectory, and create the civic confidence and trust necessary for further action. Said one community leader, "When I see your vision and I see some stuff done consistent with it, I can trust you. They're baby steps, but every step I see you take, I see as a good step, and so I rock with you. That's where a new narrative will start to be shaped."

YOUTH: A SHARED PURPOSE TO RALLY THE COMMUNITY

"Youth" (and families) is a shared purpose around which it is possible to rally the community. Concern over Jackson's youth cuts across all communities and divides; and youth represent the future of the community. If these interviews are any indication of how Jacksonians feel, then there is energy and desire to take collective action to improve the lives of Jackson's youth.

A number of possible areas to address emerged in these community leader interviews, including:

- Internet/broadband access
- Food security
- Safety
- Early childhood education
- After and out of school activities
- Playgrounds
- Parental supports

Key to moving forward would be to develop a "youth agenda" by engaging community residents, among others, and then identifying particular areas that are actionable, doable and achievable—and building from there.

Importantly, "youth" is one of those concerns that is possible for communities to rally around and for institutions, organizations, groups, parents, neighbors and others to find a place to contribute and take action in concert with others. The opportunity before Jackson is not only to address a pressing challenge, but to enable the community to come together, work together, heal together. Then the community can use this experience to build and recover in other ways.

3

CENTER THE HUMAN SPIRIT

Generate a can-do narrative.

In the 2019 Two Mississippi Museums meeting, attendees discussed how Jackson needed to focus on creating a narrative around what the community “can do.” At the time, they said, Jackson’s narrative was largely driven by what the community “can’t” and “won’t” do. We heard such statements as “we can’t trust each other” and “we can’t escape violence” and “we can’t get state support for Jackson.”

Today, that negative narrative still exists—only its deeper and more widely held than before. Outside of Jackson, community leaders said there is a narrative that “we are a crumbling town,” “Jackson is unsafe,” “Jackson is an example of liberal failure,” and that Jackson is “not worth investing in.” Within Jackson, there is a sense that “Jackson is hurting and won’t heal.”

In The Harwood Institute’s work, we have found that a community’s shared narrative is the greatest hidden factor as to whether or not a community moves forward. Ingrained negative narratives help to shape and reinforce people’s mindsets, attitudes, behaviors and actions. Through intentional actions, a new can-do narrative can come to replace a prevailing negative narrative.

There is an urgent need in Jackson to give rise to a can-do narrative rooted in a new trajectory of hope. That narrative must be based on real actions—not hyped public relations and sloganeering.

Jackson already has the makings of such an authentic narrative. It is witnessed every day in people’s community pride; in their collective response to the recent garbage crisis; in the diverse and widespread assets of the community; in people’s actions in the local neighborhoods. It lives in the people themselves.

There is an urgent need in Jackson to give rise to a can-do narrative rooted in a new trajectory of hope.

Grow belief.

As one digs further and further into what happens in communities that fall upon hard times—when crises and indeed trauma persist—what becomes clear is that people’s very sense of *belief* is undermined, at times, crushed. The human spirit diminishes. A challenge becomes how people can put one foot in front of the other, and find a path forward.



Disbelief is an intrinsically human dilemma. It cannot be fixed simply by developing and implementing more programs and securing more funding, though they are surely part of what's needed. Belief itself must be reconstituted, rebuilt, re-forged. This requires paying special attention to it and actively cultivating it. It takes lifting up genuine work that is happening in the community that demonstrates that holding belief is possible. In communities, this only happens through action. It happens as people heal. It happens as people serve as witnesses of change. It happens as a new can-do narrative spreads. It only happens over time.

Honor and protect human dignity.

Throughout America, and especially in Jackson, a radical question must be answered: is every individual worthy of having their human dignity honored and protected?

We often give lip service to human dignity. We offer it to those who look like us, sound like us, do the same work, live in a similar neighborhood, have the same color of skin, heritage, native language, faith.

Human dignity is not a choice; it's a birthright. In Jackson, many people do not feel that their human dignity is being honored and protected. They do not feel seen and heard. They do not feel that what matters to them matters to others. Promises get made and then broken. The needs of politicians take priority over the needs of the people.

When human dignity is abridged, when it is undermined, when it is violated, people lose hope. Honoring and protecting people's dignity must be at the heart of Jackson's reset.

CHOOSING PEOPLE AND HOPE

Survival mode has a way of throwing people—and communities—into a fight or flight response, where divisions and despair only simmer, get stoked, grow, deepen, harden. In many communities—as in Jackson—when a particular crisis hits, people rally. The good news is such collective action demonstrates people's innate goodness, and their natural human yearning to be part of something larger than themselves. It reflects their desire to believe. This response is a window into the true potential of a community.

But when the most acute elements of a particular crisis subside, when people and communities resettle into a new normal—often an undesirable one—fight or flight kicks back in, often with a vengeance. Some people retreat from civic life entirely; others separate into smaller and smaller groups and seek to win at any cost for their cause. Meanwhile, people and organizations of goodwill move to the edges of public life. There, they gain a greater sense of safety from the political turmoil, can narrow their agendas, and do their work with less exposure and risk.

Unfortunately, in response to these dynamics, certain established assumptions, instincts and behaviors about how change occurs can lead us astray.

- New comprehensive plans are developed, even though the community has neither the public will nor the capabilities and resources to implement them.
- People are brought together in more and more public meetings—engaging in endless talk, but nothing happens.
- The volume of divisive public discourse is turned up, which only pits people against each other.
- More infighting in the community takes place, where leaders, organizations and groups compete to promote their own agendas or programs.
- Expectations are set—or demanded—that change occurs quickly, which is a set-up for more broken promises and dashed hopes.

These dynamics can lead a community into a deeper downward spiral. While the level of noise increases, so does people's sense of confusion, even disorientation. Forward movement and hope stall.

This brings us back to the initial question. We can ask: *How do we fix Jackson?* But, inevitably, this question leads to a feeling of being overwhelmed, even paralyzed. How can one get their arms around “fixing” a community that is beset by a variety of deep, often systemic challenges? Where to start?



Even if all the resources did exist, in Jackson there are pressing questions about whether there is sufficient public will for action, a deep enough sense of shared purpose, and the readiness in the community to implement such widespread changes.

An alternative question—*What steps can a community proactively take to rebuild and recover and regain hope?*—leads to a more actionable, doable, and achievable path forward. It is a path that does not suggest that people or communities can be “fixed.” Indeed, communities and people with trauma do not get fixed—they heal, over time.

When a community rebuilds and recovers it reclaims and reconstitutes itself. There is no single action, leader or organization that wins the day. Change does not occur all at once. It unfolds over time. As it does, the community’s civic culture strengthens as people develop new ways of getting things done.

Let’s be clear: small efforts alone will not solve Jackson’s ills, but they will help put Jackson on a new trajectory of hope. People want progress; they want to heal. They want to believe.

Belief takes more than bouncing back from one crisis to another. The community must learn from its hardships and pain and focus on what matters most. It must build on its core values and beliefs and assets—and its people. It must shift its focus from crises to rebuilding and recovery.

Jackson is in need of a reset.

POSTSCRIPT

n August 7-9, I visited Jackson for a series of roundtables and meetings with community leaders and residents to talk about this report, what a reset really means for Jackson, and how people want to move forward. The visit was both challenging and deeply heartening.

Jackson is still beset by fragmentation and siloed efforts, rampant mistrust of leaders and among residents, and organizations struggling to survive. There is a pervasive fear of stepping forward and speaking up, widespread hopelessness, and ingrained negative narratives that deem progress impossible.

If someone gave Jackson \$1 billion in investment tomorrow, it may meet basic needs for a time and accomplish short-term goals. Yet it would not change these underlying conditions so essential to creating real change and sustaining it. Improving these conditions—rebuilding its civic culture—is the hard work ahead of Jackson.

My fear for Jackson—and for many other communities across our country—is that it will be left out and left behind as the country moves forward. During a roundtable, one leader said, “One of the things that is stripping a lot of Jacksonians of dignity is the economic circumstances they live in.”

The concern that this leader voiced is true in so many places across the country. Human dignity is being worn away by forces that seem beyond our control. But while the leaders I encountered were tired, worn down, frustrated, and angry, they have not given up. Nor have they given in.

For instance, during one of the roundtables, a leader stopped the conversation to share about the work of an organization that is rethinking its orientation to the community. “It’s not a grand plan. It’s a bunch of small steps.” Indeed, this is how civic culture will be rebuilt in Jackson. It is how Jackson itself will make its way forward.

What I know—and have repeatedly seen each time I visit Jackson—is that people here are relentless. They are deeply committed to each other. And they are deeply committed to the community. There is real hope here as long as the people are here.

As Jackson’s leaders and residents continue their work, they must remember: How we do the work is as important as what we do. While the actions we take are critical, there must be an unrelenting focus to regenerate civic culture. Only then can efforts have the fertile ground in which to take root, grow, and spread over time.



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