

LOCAL

# Topeka JUMP gives community organizer focus

**Max Wirestone maxcrowe@gmail.com**

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As a college student, Topeka JUMP lead organizer Shanae Holman had assumed she was going to become an attorney.

“I was certain I’d be going to law school, and that I’d be an attorney until I retired,” Holman said. “God really does work in mysterious ways.”

Holman was a junior when she realized that “law school wasn’t quite it,” and instead found community organizing. She credits God for the change in direction.

“He just put people in my path,” Holman said, “and they taught me about grassroots movements where people who are challenged in our community can be part of the the solution.”

Topeka JUMP — which stands for Justice and Unity Ministry Project — has given Holman a way to mix those two passions.

JUMP is a coalition of 19 congregations in Shawnee County, with five more congregations who are now “having the conversation,” Holman said, about joining.

The coalition's purpose is to listen to what is going on in the church communities and communicate those happenings to leaders and decision-makers. As such, Holman organizes clergy and lay leaders, who listen and gather information about the kinds of issues affecting the congregations. Then, as a group, those clergy meet and set the goals for policies for JUMP for the next year.

By bundling differing congregations together, Holman says, Topeka clergy have a stronger voice.

“So when we go to Mayor Michelle De La Isla, and say hey, this is our concern about housing. What can we do about it as a city? She has the confidence that I’m literally talking about

hundreds of people, and not just one small interest group,” Holman said.

Holman said many Topekans — particularly those most in need — don’t know how to bring about changes in policy, and she hopes that the listening campaigns of JUMP can reach and represent Topekans who typically are left out of the political process.

“The people who are overburdened with rent, the people who are working retail and hospitality jobs, and typically work second and third shift — they don’t have time to go to city council meetings,” Holman said. “They don’t even know where to begin in terms of talking to a local elected official about those kinds of concerns for their household. And so JUMP has really become this vehicle here we can create that space for them, and provide some training so people who typically don’t have a voice, do.”

Up to this point, JUMP has been made up of Christian denominations but is reaching out to include a Unitarian Universalist congregation and Temple Beth Shalom.

Rabbi Debbie Stiel, of Temple Beth Shalom, said she is excited about the partnership.

“For us, as a small congregation, this is a wonderful opportunity to get to know other congregations and the people in the congregations, and then band together and work on important issues,” Stiel said.

Some of those issues in the past have included affordable housing, mental health, and expanding bus hours and locations. Future policy goals will come, as always, from listening to congregations.

Holman said she is always ready to include more voices, particularly for those looking to volunteer.

“We do organize through faith communities, and if you happen to be a member of one of those communities, find your team leader, because they can plug you in,” Holman said.

And if you aren't?

“We’ll take your call and listen to your concerns, and see where we can plug you in one on one,” Holman said.

*Max Wirestone is a freelance writer in northeast Kansas. He can be reached at [maxcrowe@gmail.com](mailto:maxcrowe@gmail.com).*