



HOW TO DETROIT

# Want to be an activist, but don't know where to start?

*A guide for questions to ask yourself and organizations before jumping in*



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Detroit organizer Kamau Jawara says while he's happy to see more people getting involved with activism, "we need more organizing, which is more slow-paced and better equipped for times like these." Photo credit: Sarah Hulett/Outlier Media

It can be tough to know where to place one's attention given the many ways President-elect **Donald Trump** has promised to upend international and domestic policies. Maybe you feel

called to action, but unsure about how to get started. How can you address societal injustices, support your community and create meaningful change? How can you get involved with groups that align with your values?

Navigating the world of activism can feel overwhelming. In this guide, **Kamau Jawara**, a lead organizer at **We the People Michigan**, offers insights on how to approach activism thoughtfully and vet organizations before committing to them.

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## Activism or organizing?

Before jumping into any movement, it's important to understand the difference between activism and organizing. "Activism is about raising awareness, cognizance, and mobilizing people," Jawara said. "Organizing, however, is taking responsibility for the development of long-term leadership and building community power."

Activists might take on multiple issues at a time, while organizers tend to root themselves in one community or cause for the long haul.

Engaging in activism means contributing your energy to causes you care about. "People are frustrated about their material conditions — issues like reproductive rights, economic equity, and public safety," Jawara noted.

The first step in "**going from anger to action**" is to acknowledge what you're feeling and understand your motivations. Knowing where your strengths and interests lie can help you decide which role is best for you.

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## Finding the right organization: What to consider

Joining an organization is a big step, and finding the right fit is important. According to a database of nonprofits from Cause IQ, there are around **200 civil rights and social justice organizations** in metro Detroit.

Before joining an organization, it's first important to understand your personal needs and boundaries. Start by:

- **Defining “home”:** Reflect on what makes a space feel comforting and safe to you.
- **Clarifying your needs:** Identify the conditions that ensure you feel safe, valued and empowered.
- **Setting boundaries:** Recognize nonnegotiable aspects that you’re not willing to compromise.
- **Determining your flexibility:** Pinpoint areas where you can adapt or make concessions for the group’s well-being.

This self-awareness can help to prevent a situation where someone joins too hastily, only to realize later the group isn’t a good fit.

Jawara **created a zine** that has Detroit-specific organizations and more tips to “step further into public action.”

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## Vetting an organization: Questions to ask

Once you’ve reflected on your needs and goals, it’s time to **vet potential organizations**. Jawara suggests these considerations:

- **Values alignment:** Does the organization’s mission align with your principles?
- **Inclusivity:** Is the space welcoming to your identity? For example, if you’re queer or undocumented, does the organization actively support and protect people like you?
- **Safety:** Do you feel secure with those around you, and do they feel the same about you?
- **Community impact:** What kind of change does the organization aim to create? Is it focused on short-term action, long-term organizing or both?

Safety is another critical factor when getting involved in activism. Jawara encourages people to define what safety means to them personally.

“For some, safety might involve law enforcement, while for others, it means avoiding interactions with police altogether,” he said.

Jawara advises reflecting on whether you feel secure with those around you and whether they feel the same about you. It’s also important to think about your identity and any potential risks

that may come with participating in specific spaces.

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## **Respectful participation and expectation-setting**

Entering the world of activism means being open to learning and acknowledging that you don't know everything. "Show up knowing that there are many realities people face. Be ready to learn from others who may have different experiences or expertise. Respect the community and its needs, and remember that real change takes time," Jawara advises.

Setting realistic expectations is key. Jawara said one of his organizing mentors offered him this important advice: Recognize what you can control and what you can't. Some things will happen regardless of your actions, and external events alone shouldn't dictate how you engage in activism.

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## **Start small, build big**

Jawara's journey into activism began with organizing in high school and college, focusing on issues like retention rates for Black students at Wayne State University. His advice for newcomers is to start where you are.

"Find an issue that affects your community and begin by listening and learning. Small actions can lead to big impacts when rooted in community needs and collective effort."

Being engaged in your community will often bring you directly or indirectly to the organization that aligns best with you. Jawara found out about We the People MI through word of mouth.

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## **How to be an activist without joining an organization**

You can be an effective activist without joining a formal organization. Here are some ways you can contribute to causes, amplify voices and make change on your own terms:

## **Educate yourself**

**Follow local activists** on social media, where they often share educational resources, events and calls to action.

**Read books and watch documentaries** to learn Detroit's history and social justice movements, and to deepen your understanding of systemic issues.

## **Amplify voices**

**Use social media** to advocate by sharing posts, stories and campaigns from activists and grassroots movements. Be intentional about what you share; the internet is littered with misinformation, disinformation and too little context.

**Create and distribute educational content** such as infographics and stories that raise awareness about issues affecting Detroit communities.

## **Support local initiatives**

**Host community conversations** by organizing informal gatherings or discussion groups to talk about issues such as housing, environmental justice or racial equity. Use community spaces like libraries, cafés or parks to facilitate these dialogues.

**Volunteer informally** by offering your writing, graphic design, tech or other skills to community projects. Help with cleanups, food drives or pop-up events organized by community members.

**Shop with intent** by prioritizing Black- and minority-owned businesses. Support enterprises that are environmentally conscious or invest in community well-being.

## **Engage in policy change**

**Attend public meetings** such as town halls, city council meetings and school board meetings to interact with local government officials, voice concerns or offer suggestions.

**Advocate for a cause** by researching and engaging in campaigns for justice reforms, affordable housing and environmental protections.

**Offer financial support** by donating directly to causes, grassroots movements and bail funds

when you cannot attend events or take direct action.

## **Start your own initiative**

**Identify a community need** and organize a neighborhood cleanup, book drive or campaign to improve local resources.

**Contribute to public art projects** like murals that address systemic issues.

**Use visual art, music, poetry, dance or movement** as an expression to spread awareness.

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