



Ministry Saves City Community Centers Memphis Athletic Ministries to Reopen Four Centers

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MEMPHIS, Tenn. - Four community centers that almost shut down last year because of budget concerns received a lifeline. **Memphis Athletic Ministries** is stepping in and taking over the centers with the help of the city. The Greenlaw Community Center sits in the heart of the inner city as a haven for kids to play, have



positive role models and feel safe. But this safety net, including a few other facilities, was on the city of Memphis' chopping block.

Last year former mayor Willie Herenton planned to close four centers and five libraries. His goal was to save taxpayers up to 2 million dollars.

James Armfield, President of Memphis Athletic Ministries, said "we heard that they were going to close we though lets go ahead and provide something we can give back to the kids, give them a place to go."

Armfield says he knows community centers are invaluable. His organization is faith based and benefits kids between 8 and 18. "We bring kids in, try to teach them about the right things to do in life, hopefully keep them on the straight and narrow."

Community centers often serve thousand of kids every year. Armfield says by keeping the doors open, he hopes more kids will avoid turning to the pressures of the streets and instead find refuge here.

"We will operate some tutoring, free play, play a little ball, put them on teams... we are a faith based organization and will provide some faith based opportunities as well." He says it's an opportunity to remind kids there are places and people who can make a positive difference.

"They can see some great men around, great women too. Hopefully they will in turn utilize some of the things we can provide for them hopefully that will make them have a better life."

Memphis Athletic Ministries will open Greenlaw Community Center by the end of October and the other three will open on November 1st.

4 community centers stay open

City's new partner, **Memphis Athletic Ministries**, will provide activities

By Amos Maki
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Four city community centers that were nearly closed last year due to budget concerns have new life thanks to a public-private partnership that was cemented this month. **Memphis Athletic Ministries**, a faith-based organization that uses sports to reach kids, was recently approved by the City Council to operate four inner-city community centers: Greenlaw, Simon/Boyd-Magnolia, Bethel Labelle and Hamilton.



Bobbie Graves, 13, (from left) Apriana Golden, 9, and Detriana Golden, 11, play Mancala at the Grnnelaw Community Center.

"I think it will be good for those areas," said **City Council chairman Harold Collins**, a MAM board member. "Having **MAM** involved with their programming will only enhance their experiences within the community."

Last year, former Mayor Willie Herenton, citing a \$700,000 efficiency study by Deloitte Consulting LLP, proposed closing the community centers, along with five libraries, as a cost-saving measure, but the City Council appropriated \$607,703 to keep the facilities open. In March, the city issued requests for proposals to operate the community centers and **MAM**, which was founded in 1998, was chosen.

"The city sees this approach as a very positive arrangement, particularly given that these centers were identified in the efficiency study as centers that should be closed or sold by the city," said Joseph Lee III, deputy director of the Parks Division.

The agreement with the city has an initial term of two years and two, four-year options, which means the agreement could last a total of 10 years. **MAM** will staff the community centers, provide all the recreational activities and even pay the utility bills. The organization is scheduled to take over operations at the community centers by Nov. 1.

"Our general philosophy is to try to partner with people who have underutilized recreational facilities," said **Gib Vestal**, president of MAM. "They're providing the building, and we provide the staff and services to serve the neighborhood."

The four MAM community centers will offer a broader menu of recreational and educational opportunities -- including computer labs at each facility, lessons in manners and MAM's financial literacy program -- than what is currently offered at the city's other community centers. The four centers will be open from

around 2 p.m. to 9 p.m. during the school year. During the summer, they will be open from noon to 9 p.m. They will be open year-round on Saturdays.

"Our staff members will be actively interacting with the kids," said Vestal. "Part of our strategy is to have structured activities alongside open activity."

Each facility will have a neighborhood director to oversee operations and handle community outreach programs. At Greenlaw Community Center in the Uptown area, former University of Memphis basketball star Detric Golden, founder of Golden Child Ministries, will serve as neighborhood director.

"(MAM) represents class and Christ, and that is why I jumped at the opportunity to work with them," said Golden. "Their name means so much in this community."

William Jones, a 14-year-old who lives across the street from Greenlaw, doesn't know much about city budgets or community center operations, but he's glad the doors of his neighborhood community center are staying open. "They help us to stay out of trouble and get good grades," he said.

To learn more about MAM, go to mamsports.org.