

Non Profit Leader of the Year - USA

Dr Chad Audi

President & CEO of Detroit Rescue Mission Ministries

Dr. Chad Audi is an experienced senior executive with over 23 years of executive management experience and recognition as a visionary and dynamic leader in non-profit and for-profit sectors.

For nearly 2 decades, he has served as an accomplished President and Chief Executive Officer of Detroit Rescue Mission Ministries (DRMM), a not-for-profit organization cited by the U.S. News and World Report as the 13th largest substance abuse treatment center in the U.S, and reputed as one of the largest Rescue Missions in the world.

A sought-after high impact trainer and consultant in effective leadership, marketing, communications, corporate governance, conflict resolution and negotiation, Dr. Chad Audi has delivered well received lectures and trainings at universities, professional associations, top businesses and nonprofits in the United States, Canada, United Kingdom and other countries.



Tell us a little bit about the Detroit Rescue Mission Ministries.

Founded in 1909 as a Christian nonprofit soup kitchen for the homeless, the Detroit Rescue Mission Ministries has grown to become one of the largest rescue missions in the US, providing daily wrap-around services to over 2200 domestic violence victims, homeless veterans, at-risk youth, returning citizens, and substance use disorder clients at its various locations in five Michigan counties. Each day, with the help of about 400 (full and part-time) staff members, over 13,000 volunteers, and many young and elderly donors, we bring thousands of women, children and men closer to the stability and self-reliance they so desperately need.

In what ways does the Detroit Rescue Mission Ministries improve the life of the vulnerable people of Detroit?

We have many 24/7 services aimed at helping them gain stability, sobriety and self-reliance. The ground zero is our emergency shelter services for men and women who are homeless, providing them hot shower, decent clothing, soothing beds, nutritious meals and bespoke life-enrichment services aimed at helping them stand on their feet again.

Such services become more pronounced in the very cold winter months. With our services, no homeless person should have frostbite or die in the cold streets of the Detroit area. People come to our doors for help or we go pick them from the streets, if alerted about their situation, and they agree to come with us. On some days in the winter season, our street outreach team get as many as 300 calls to pick up homeless persons and bring them to our emergency shelters.

There are two sacrosanct aspects of our corporate culture here at the Detroit Rescue Mission. The first is that our staff members do not turn away anybody that comes to us for help. After all, we exist as an organisation

to help those in need; the “least of these” in our community. The second is that everyone under our care must be treated with the dignity and respect they deserve. Yes, everyone - young or old, rich or poor - deserves dignity and respect.

And for many of our clients, that's so important because their difficult circumstances have dealt a heavy blow to their self-esteem. So, imagine how good they feel when they are treated well. Besides, as the Holy Book says, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”. If I were homeless, I would certainly want to be treated well. I believe the same expectation applies to everybody else.

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What brought you to the organisation?

It's a story I have shared on many occasions. My background is in finance. In mid-1997, I had completed my first PhD and received a private-sector job offer with mouth-watering pay. While waiting for the start date of the job, someone suggested I volunteer for a local nonprofit that desperately needed to put its finances in order. So, I came and offered my services as a volunteer.

Before then, I knew little about rescue missions. I had been involved in the business world, not in nonprofits. And my view of homeless people was that they needed a few bucks in alms, and nothing more. So, I would give them alms. Knowing what I know now, I laugh at that perspective because many are

homeless for reasons that include mental illness and sudden loss of jobs during an economic downturn.

But from being a volunteer, I got sucked in. Pay was so little compared to my private sector job-in-waiting, but I was moved by the fact that the Christian nonprofit was changing many lives, including those of some highly educated people who fell on hard times.

The then President and CEO, Rev. Don DeVos, who became my mentor, encouraged me to listen to success stories that got me really hooked. And my father, who has been my role model, encouraged me to make a difference and not just a living.

Almost 24 years later, I am glad I made that decision. You can't put a price tag on changing lives for the better, can you?

What are the challenges of being the CEO of a not-for-profit organisation? What are the rewards it comes with?

We operate in a fluid environment especially in terms of government policy. Today, the policy says this, and tomorrow, the policy says that. So, we are always adapting to policy changes. And of course, you have to deal with different audiences – from board members to community partners and diverse sets of donors, paying each one the attention they deserve.

Add that to having as many as 400 (full and part-time) staff members, over 13,000 volunteers, and an average of 2200 clients each day, and you get the picture of a complex reality that faces a President and CEO. But we do our best each day.

As I stated earlier, you can't put a price tag on changing precious lives for the better. It's a great reward to see smiles on the faces of people who used to be sad and hopeless. These days, I prefer to take my family to “distant” cities to enjoy sit-down restaurant meals. Of course, I love to patronise businesses around me, but chances are that when we go to a restaurant nearby,



a manager, waiter or waitress there is an ex-client who would try so hard to give me beyond-the-ordinary service and then insist on paying for the meals. Of course, I end up paying for the meals and giving them a big tip. But you get the point. If the joy of seeing such glowing fruits of our labour is not a big reward, I don't know what is.

In what ways has the Detroit Rescue Mission Ministries helped people during the current global pandemic?

In this pandemic, the need has become even greater in our target population. Thus, apart from the daily wrap-around services we provide to at-risk children, homeless veterans, domestic violence victims, returning citizens and substance use disorder clients, we've had to open new sites for overflow and quarantine, serve more hot meals, sanitise common areas more frequently, and promote handwashing and social distancing, among others.

All that, as you can imagine, tripled our operational costs. But we keep doing the needful.

With the help of area police officers and fire marshals, we've delivered over 7000 boxes of food items to the doorsteps of seniors in eight cities around us. Last Christmas, we gave away over 25,000 toys and gift items to families in need, lifting their spirit amid all the chaos, deaths and depression surrounding the pandemic.

And following our recent spotlight on top-rated NBC's Today Show, we received last week over 14,000 toys from toy giant Hasbro. We are distributing them to children in need through the police departments in cities like Detroit, Dearborn, Highland Park, Inkster and Westland, helping them achieve their community policing objectives.

What do you hope to achieve in the future with the Detroit Rescue Mission Ministries?

Well, I wish we'll come to a time when there are no more homeless, hungry and hurting people around us. I wish so. But until then, we will continue to seek more effective ways to help them overcome their challenges and lead better lives.

That's what we are about.

I am not prescient to know what the future holds, but we are doing our best today to prepare ourselves for whatever it brings our way. Hopefully, we'd have increased numbers of helpful volunteers, partners and donors from Michigan and beyond.

Maybe, we expand into more Michigan cities as we have done in the last seven years. Maybe, we have new programs to tackle emerging challenges in the community. Maybe, we open up facilities overseas – in Asia and Africa. Only God knows.

What motivates you about the amazing work you do with the organisation?

We are motivated by the love we have for people and the desire to help them turn their lives around. And the more lives we touch and transform, the more motivated we are to do more.

What does this award mean to you?

Obviously, we don't do what we do for any accolade but it's good once in a while to be appreciated for our ceaseless efforts in touching and transforming precious lives around us.

So, the award is a pat on the back for our deep-seated empathy and compassion that have brought positive change to tens of thousands. And though we've won many awards over the years, this one is special because, apart from coming from one of my favourite cities in the world, it feels like an honour bestowed by esteemed peers who are also making a difference in their own areas. I can't wait to place the plaque on my office wall.

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