

Ford CEO Jim Farley is doing important work at TCF Center — and few know it

Every day inside the TCF Center downtown, a team of volunteers led by faith helps hundreds of Detroiters. It's a tale of hope and kindness amid crisis.

Phoebe Wall Howard, Detroit Free Press

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Father Tim McCabe has kept a secret for a devout Catholic who enjoys spending time quietly serving the church and people who need help.

"He doesn't want anybody to know who he is," McCabe said. "He may just be in the kitchen scrubbing the stove."

Jim Farley, 58, is the CEO of Ford and can be found serving meals at Pope Francis Center downtown when his schedule allows. His charitable work began at age 16 with his grandfather going to Saints Peter & Paul Jesuit Church on St. Antoine.

It is Detroit's oldest church building in continuous use, built in 1848.



Ford Motor Co. CEO Jim Farley left, hands a cup of coffee to Shane Baertsch, 47, who is staying at the St. John's Community Center,...

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Farley, who lives in the heart of the city near Campus Martius, volunteers periodically on weekends at Pope Francis Center. On the sidewalk outside the warming center is a bronze sculpture titled, "Homeless Jesus."

Church members created a day center for homeless people with a commercial kitchen, dining room that seats approximately 80 people without social distancing, three showers, four bathrooms and laundry facilities.

While Farley is devoted to the church and its work, he has declined requests for two years from the Free Press to accompany him until this time of crisis.

Part of his commitment to people with addiction and struggle is inspired by his cousin, iconic comedian Chris Farley, who overdosed on cocaine and morphine at age 33. The death devastated the tight-knit Irish family that adored him.

In recent years, Jim Farley has made himself accessible to the executive director of the Pope Francis Center by text or email.

"He always asks what he can do to help. He gets, like, 1,500 emails a day and he always responds," McCabe said.

The 58-year-old priest, a Ferndale native who studied theology at the University of California, Berkeley, has overseen homeless services for five years as executive director of the Pope Francis Center.

McCabe frequently turns to Farley for reliable help and advice.

"It's amazing, really," McCabe said.

After 30 years of caring for needy people, the church project was driven out of its home by the pandemic year 2020 for the first time in history. At issue was simply an inability to serve a population in need that not only surged but required social distancing and lifesaving health protocols that simply couldn't be achieved in a small space.

"We have always relied exclusively on charitable contributions, primarily from metro Detroiters," McCabe said. "Whenever the need arose, whether the polar vortex or the pandemic, and our costs skyrocketed, Detroit never let us down."

On an early Saturday morning in March, as a sliver of the moon shone in the sky and blue lights that ring the Renaissance Center towers blazed downtown, cars lined up in parking spaces on the roof of the city's home for big conventions, the TCF Center. Old time Detroiters still call it Cobo Hall.

The streets were empty. No one walked along Randolph. Or Jefferson. Or St. Antoine. Campus Martius was quiet. Cadillac Square was lit up with holiday lights. American flags blew in the wind.

Men began to line up outside the street-level door off Congress.

In years past, this site of the North American International Auto Show has attracted some 1 million visitors from around the globe. The pandemic shut everything down. The TCF Center has gone from a spectacular economic driver for the city of Detroit to a care center in a time of crisis.

In November, the TCF Center became an emergency COVID-19 hospital, a shower and laundry site for homeless people, and a source of food and clothing.

"We went to the TCF Center and they responded with generosity," McCabe said. "We looked everywhere for a place big enough to do what we're doing with social distancing requirements. There was nothing."

The city contracted the place to the Pope Francis Center, a deal initially set to run through March, but just extended to June 1.

"The whole reason they're here is not because they don't have a facility of their own. They do," said Patrick Bero, CEO/CFO of the Detroit Regional Convention Facility Authority. "They can't host the number of people they normally host within the confines of their facility. Even under tents, it's not an ideal environment."

Bero plays a key role in operations of the facility. In 2009, the Michigan Legislature transferred control of then-Cobo Center to an entity with members from the city of Detroit, and Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties.

After months of being closed to auto and boat shows, trade conventions, athletic events, big weddings and charity fundraisers because of the pandemic, the TCF Center and Pope Francis Center partnered to open the doors in mid-November. More than 17,000 Detroiters have been served.

Just inside the rooftop door of TCF, Sarah Paulsrud, 23, takes the temperature of volunteers as they arrive. She moved to southwest Detroit near Most Holy Redeemer Church from Lee's Summit, Missouri, in August as part of the Jesuit volunteer corps after college.

"I love Detroit. It has a small town feel," she said.

Paulsrud said she exchanges books with one of the Pope Francis Center's guests regularly as part of an informal book club. He finds books in little free library boxes and they talk about them.

Dan Asam, 32, a computer programmer from Lincoln Park, has been volunteering at TCF Center since November. On this day, he stood beside Farley, as they both filled paper coffee cups with hot coffee from large insulated plastic urns, awaiting the expected rush of guests, a term volunteers and staff use for the people served.



Sarah Paulsrud, 23, moved to Detroit from Lee's Summit, Missouri in August to help with Pope Francis Center. She is seen here on Saturday, March...

This all takes place in the convention center on the lower level, where eight rooms are used during healthier times for small group meetings. Now the area is used as two dining rooms, two sitting areas, clothing and hygiene storage and pickup, a medical clinic and staff office to process guest paperwork, and a laundry room.

The Detroit auto show and [Autorama](#) are held primarily on Level Two, the main floor accessed from Jefferson Avenue.

Currently, the showers on-site are housed in a trailer on a ramp leading to the parking garage. It actually is in direct line of sight down a ramp from the upscale Apparatus Room Restaurant in the Detroit Foundation Hotel on Larned Street.

Around 9 a.m., which is considered lunchtime under the circumstances, volunteers serve hot meals such as spaghetti and meatballs or chicken and vegetables. Before and after meals, people gather to read and sleep and watch the news in the adjacent rooms. They're doing laundry and taking showers.

Guests may use phones and meet with pro bono lawyers to navigate the court system or consult with volunteer doctors to review health concerns. It is also a time to fill knapsacks and bags with soap, shampoo, feminine hygiene products, toothbrushes, toothpaste and hand warming gel packets that tuck into gloves.

"We have staff working to help our guests navigate the housing system to find them permanent housing, so there's just no way we could do all we're doing without this great team of volunteers," McCabe said.

Asam, working that day with Farley, talked about his job at Blue Cross and everyday life stresses. Farley listened and asked questions.

"With the pandemic, I have a lot more free time," Asam said, adjusting his rubber gloves. "This all puts things into perspective. It makes me grateful for what I have."



Ford Motor Co. CEO Jim Farley grabs a t-shirt for a guest request, while he works the front office at the Pope Francis Center in the TCF Center in downtown Detroit on March 6, 2021.

Farley, meanwhile, wore two face masks. His black running pants and vintage Nikes allowed him to quickly move between getting coffee cups and T-shirts to filling orders for toiletries.

A volunteer wondered whether the "FAAN" letters on Farley's black T-shirt indicated his role with a TV station. It stood for Ford African Ancestry Network.

"People here are very thankful and really nice," Farley said, putting out cups filled with coffee on the folding table to keep the line moving.

After doors opened at 7 a.m., people streamed in for warm oatmeal and coffee, and individual bags with bagels and oranges. A heavier homemade meal is served at 9 a.m.

"I've been coming now for quite some time," said Pedro Hunter, 44, of Detroit. "It's a blessing. We really need the showers and we get two hot meals. They do a wonderful job for us."

Hunter recently had heart surgery and is seeking help getting his medical benefits. For now, Hunter said, men have been grateful for the opportunity to ride city buses at night to stay warm.

He misses the Detroit car show this year, what Hunter calls "the fashion show" because of the swanky events. Now, just having a place to lay down for a few hours and take a nap and shower at the TCF Center is a gift, he said.

"Would you like a hot coffee to warm up?" Farley asked, as men streamed by slowly. Some took cups, others said nothing as they passed and nodded.

"I'd like a bourbon and water please," one man said to Farley.

"Do you want ice cubes with that?" he responded, smiling.

Farley looking down at the tiny cups of oatmeal and whispered, "Nothing is fancy."

People talked to the global executive having no idea who he was or that he had just finished a series of calls with teams in China. Volunteers asked his name, and he replied only, "Jim. My name is Jim."

Farley shared how these men talked about staying safe on the street and the need to get people mental health support. The problem isn't just about getting a job, it's deeper and often misunderstood, he said.



Ford CEO Jim Farley is doing important work at TCF Center — and few know it

Jim Farley, 58, is the CEO of Ford and can be found serving meals at Pope Francis Center downtown when his schedule allows. It is something he began at Saints Peter & Paul Jesuit Church on St. Antoine with his grandfather.

"It's hard for people in the suburbs to understand why people choose to live under bridges. They may have been abused as a child and they want freedom," Farley said.

Or sometimes people avoid shelters because they fear being robbed or getting bedbugs, McCabe said. Sleeping at Hart Plaza feels safer.

He has placed 15 people into homes in recent months. "Even then, people will sleep on the floor next to their bed. Or turn on the radio because the silence is too quiet."

Farley has cooked eggs in the past for the men and women needing a hot meal. He works in the office area too, giving out mail. People without addresses can't apply for jobs or make medical appointments, so they use the church or TCF Center as their address now.



Men and women stop at the Front Office to receive vital resources like socks, gloves, and toiletries at the Pope Francis Center in TCF Center...

In times past, Farley said, people on the street have recognized him and thanked him. They associate him only with offering a helping hand, and there's nothing like it.

Paul Ciaravino, 17, a student from Grosse Pointe Woods, sorted socks while Farley ran frantically through a back room filling requests from a line of people requesting lip balm, gloves, lotion.

"It's a good workout," Farley said rushing past. He combed through bins of T-shirts, looking for the right size to fill the latest order. A line had formed outside the room.

"Customer service is hard," Farley said, laughing and feeding through boxes as the line grew. "Now he's gonna be pissed because I can't find another Superman shirt. He liked the Superman shirt I brought out for someone else. Well, Batman will just have to do."

He disappeared around the corner to get the next order, coming back with sticky notes because he couldn't remember everything at once. Belts. Sizes of shirts. Different sock preferences. Mostly, folks want shirts that are anything but white. Or pink.

Farley looked down at the list and asked the one person in the back room with him, "Where do I find a pantyliner? I don't even know what that is."

LaShon Talley, 47, a volunteer from Royal Oak, explained that it's a women's feminine product. And Farley said, walking back to the long line outside the room, "It literally was out of my league. I'm learning every day."

He came back, "Do we have shoes? I don't think so but I promised I'd check. OK. No shoes." And he filled out an order form with the help of Talley.

"This is about just helping the person. They want what they want, just like me," Farley said. "People are asking for basic stuff, things we all take for granted. We're fortunate. Just blessed."

Few of the volunteers have any idea that Farley is Farley. He is just another run-ragged volunteer doing his best. He is not dressed for photos. He is dressed to blend in with the crowd.

Boratha Tan, 27, of Detroit has been cutting hair at Pope Francis Center since 2016. On this day, his hair appointment was a no-show, so he helped in the TCF Center laundry room.



Boratha Tan, 27, of Detroit volunteers in the laundry room at the Pope Francis Center in TCF Center in downtown Detroit on March 6, 2021....

Screenshot

"I grew up in a family that always gave back. My parents emigrated from Cambodia to Philadelphia. Mom never had a high school diploma and Dad barely passed high school," he said. "This is something I want to do, I need to do."

Tan, a licensed cosmetologist and Ford engineer, said hello to Farley in passing.

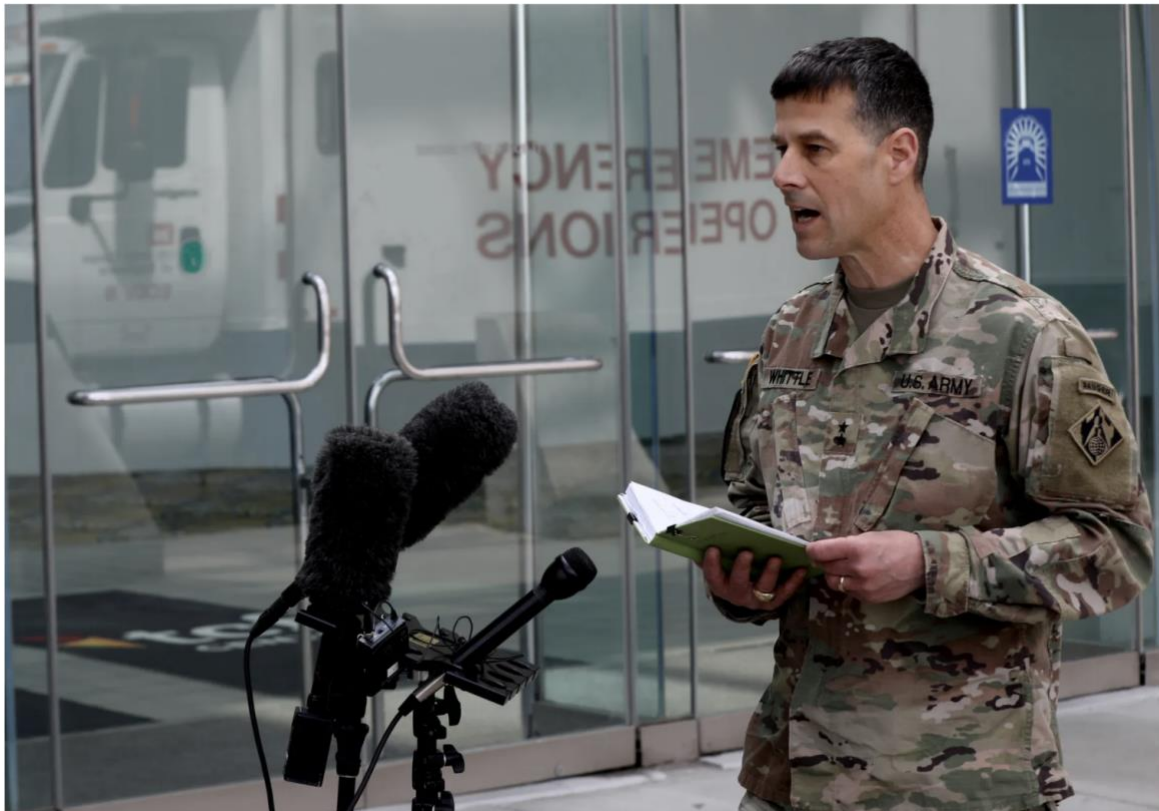
Just then, Willie Randle, 55, a Chicago native raised on the east side of Detroit, came through the food line featuring fresh oranges and individually packaged bagels singing the Oscar Meyer Wiener song. Just to make people smile. He celebrated surviving COVID-19 "with the grace of the Lord."

Randle used to cook for churches and shelters, then ended up living in Hart Plaza.

"Just because I'm homeless, I ain't got to look it or feel it or be it," he said. "I'm not the man I used to be. I'm sure not the man I want to be. I want to thank the Lord for letting me be the man I am just for today." Randle looked around the room at the volunteers feeding everybody and took a breath.

"We fall down, but we get up," he said. "Just because you going through bad times, trials and tribulations, that don't mean that you have to live it, that don't mean you have to be it. You have to inspire yourself. If you find one person in the world that care about you ... that gives you hope to live, hope to do something."

This is the Motor City. The industrial heartland at its core.



"In a lot of ways, TCF is the story of Detroit and COVID," Mayor Mike Duggan told the Free Press. "It would've been the center of the international auto show. But you remember, almost exactly a year ago, the state took over the TCF Center to create 1,000 hospital beds, expecting COVID to explode."

Few of those overflow beds were used, in part, because Detroiters followed pandemic protocols, using fewer than two dozen beds in the emergency hospital, Duggan said.

"Then it evolved to serving the community. The vaccination site has gotten enormous publicity but just as important is what Father McCabe did in the other side of the TCF Center. He's been caring for those who need some help for a long time," Duggan said. "And when the economic impact hit, we needed a lot more help."



Pope Francis Center Executive Director Father Tim McCabe receives his second dose of Covid-19 vaccine at the lower level of TCF Center in Detroit on Feb. 11, 2021.

JUNFU HAN, DETROIT FREE PRESS

The city did assist this COVID-19 relief effort financially, Duggan said.

"But this is, by and large, this is driven by Pope Francis Center, and people like Jim Farley at Ford, who hasn't done this because it got him personal publicity. He did it because he believes in it. Now you've got on any given day 200 to 300 people who otherwise might not have known where to go," Duggan said.

"They know they can go downtown to the TCF Center. They know they can get hot meals, a shower, doctors there, lawyers there. You can get clothing. It really is a remarkable accomplishment."

The Detroit Department of Housing and Revitalization helped get the TCF site up and running with a \$300,000 grant and the city agency continues to collaborate on the project.

That money is used to offset costs of supplies as well as heat, electricity, water, security and cleaning.

The contract allows the Pope Francis Center authorized access to the site, and involves reimbursement of costs incurred at the TCF Center. The charitable operation is not being required to pay rent, McCabe said. "We're simply covering the costs."

To city leaders, the Pope Francis collaboration is a model of excellence.

The nonprofit, one of a handful of social service agencies that addresses the needs of homeless downtown, operates on a \$1.5 million annual budget.

"We took the assets of the city and the talents of the city in a time of need, and it all came together to help the homeless," Duggan said. "Gary Torgow (CEO of TCF Bank) has this community in his heart, so you wouldn't expect anything different. ... Everybody saw Father McCabe's vision from the beginning as being a great way to expand service quickly in a building people could get to. Everybody in this community has been behind it and been proud of it."

Detroit has emerged from bankruptcy during the Great Recession and is feeling the love, Duggan said. "The rest of the state has embraced us."

"Every food distribution center I have been to in the last year, it's people from the city and the suburbs coming together. We're seeing exactly the same thing at TCF," he said. "We have a lot of people in the region with good hearts. They don't just talk, they act. It makes a real difference." Behind the scenes, the team making it all happen watches it unfold in awe.

"I'm a big believer that character is measured by things you do when no one is looking," Bero said. "We didn't go out to promote this."

Whether it's the emergency field hospital, food distribution, sanitization center where PPE is cleaned for medical centers, Pope Francis Center or the vaccination center, the happenings at TCF are "part of who we are and what we do," Bero said.

"When our community asks for help, we help because we're part of the community," he said. "I think it would be an injustice for us to allow those resources to sit on the sidelines when our community needs help."

As Farley finished his Saturday shift and turned to head out the door, a man in a Lions jersey stepped over to tell Farley the shirt he had provided earlier didn't fit. The man asked Farley to exchange it for a 2X or 3X. Farley took the T-shirt, apologized and headed toward boxes in the back.

"They give me Little Lord Fauntleroy clothes," said Curtis Smith, 50, of Detroit. "I'm a big, big man."



These paper bags stacked up in a supply room run by the Pope Francis Center at TCF contain articles of donated clothing such as underwear,...

[Show caption](#) ▾



Farley reemerged with two big T-shirts, gray and black, and sent the man on his way smiling. Farley slipped off to make his Saturday business calls.

When the pandemic began, McCabe, 58, of Detroit had to make quick decisions.



Large white tents for the homeless to sit, get warm and eat their breakfast or lunch handed out to them at the Pope Francis Center...

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ERIC SEALS, DETROIT FREE PRESS

"We had to pivot," he said. "We realized we couldn't bring people into the church anymore. We moved to the parking lot of the University of Detroit Mercy law school on March 14, when the state began to close everything down. Within 48 hours, we put circus tents in the parking lot, a shower trailer, hand-washing stations, port-a-johns out there and doing what we could."

Pope Francis Center continued feeding people out of the church door using its kitchen over at Larned and St. Antoine streets. McCabe reached out to his religious community to recruit Jesuit students from Chicago.

Serving more than 200 people a day was inconceivable over the past 30 years. Since COVID-19, the nonprofit, now operating in a big city convention center, rarely drops below 200 and sometimes reaches 500. Other programs in the city have shut down.

"Food insecurity has become a bigger issue for people on the edge, including restaurant workers," McCabe said. "People are struggling, and couch surfing. People who couldn't afford to pay their rent and buy food or insulin, they would supplement coming to us."

During the cold snap in February, TCF opened its space to provide temporary overnight relief.

"One of our guests lost his feet to frostbite, a man in his 60s," McCabe said. "He was just walking around trying to stay warm. For those of us who cared for him, the amputation was traumatic and seeing his pain was heartbreaking. We got him to a hospital and out of the cold."

COVID-19 has led to job loss, family loss and a struggle to survive. When the moratorium on evictions is lifted, McCabe fears the number of people without homes will skyrocket.

"I did an overnight at TCF and went into the kitchen at 4:30 a.m. to make coffee," McCabe said. "I got a call that someone needed to leave. The man says to me, 'I have got to get to work. I work at 12 Mile and Van Dyke and it takes three buses.' So this man is up at 5 a.m. to take three buses to get to work and he's living in an overnight shelter."



Dir. of Institutional Advancement Leslie Lynch hands out blankets and toiletries to the homeless at the Pope Francis Center temporarily relocated at the TCF Center...

[Show caption](#) ▾

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Patrons have likened the cozy yet spacious convention center to a Taj Mahal with great cooks and delicious meals.

Thankfully, warmer temperatures are coming.

Last year, before the move to TCF, McCabe worried.

"As fall came, I was ringing alarm bells with the city, we can't do this in the winter," McCabe said. "Last spring was terrible. We'd be in the 40s in the morning and have little heaters that weren't keeping people warm. I just couldn't find anyplace big enough to socially distance."



Father Tim McCabe, S.J. talks with Wayne Shropshire as he steps to the front of the line to receive one of the two free meals...

[Show caption](#) ▾

KIMBERLY P. MITCHELL, DETROIT FREE PRESS

Now that the convention center is home, patrons are served daily from 7 a.m. to 11 a.m., with a high-nutrition meal at 9 a.m.

"Initially, during the early parts of the pandemic, people were really afraid when there was 'shelter in place.' They didn't know what that meant, when you're told to stay at home and you don't have a home," McCabe said. "I promised the homeless — our guests — we would not leave. We knew we would get through this together."

Note: The Pope Francis Center is having its 2021 annual gala on April 15 at the [Detroit Foundation Hotel and the Shinola Hotel](#), streamed live virtually and in person with social distancing protocols. For more information: <https://one.bidpal.net/pfcgala2021/about>

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