



Chattanooga, TN

▲ Community Example from Chapter 1 of “Lessons for Leaders:”
Lessons in Community Capacity Building

Community Background

Despite Chattanooga’s many physical attributes, like the surrounding and beautiful mountains, many of the city’s residents face serious health and environmental challenges. They lack play spaces and access to healthy food. High rates of obesity, environmental pollution and limited transportation services compound the situation. In 2007, the Chattanooga-Hamilton County Health Department’s Step ONE program formed the Partnership for Healthy Living to address these health challenges and other disparities. While the partnership consisted of more than 40 organizations, programs, businesses and community groups, it recognized the need to include community members and leaders. Therefore, in 2009, with the *Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities* (HKHC) grant, the partnership organized a group of community members and leaders directly affected by health disparities and built environment challenges. They called this initiative Grow Healthy Together Chattanooga and focused on increasing opportunities for healthy eating and active living in the East and South Chattanooga communities.

Community Action

Driven by a desire and passion to build capacity at a grassroots level, HKHC Project Director John Bilderback and Project Coordinators Tina Vance and Falice Haire understood the need for leadership at multiple levels. Their facilitative leadership was indispensable. They invested considerable energy, spending more time listening than talking, and cultivated relationships with residents that were built on mutual trust, respect and an understanding of the challenges residents experienced trying to lead healthy lives. Leadership Advisory Councils (LACs) were formed in both Chattanooga communities. They focused

on strategies prioritized by residents, including neighborhood development, healthy eating and active living.

The LACs received capacity-building trainings throughout the HKHC grant period. New opportunities for engagement with residents included a workshop with the Regional Planning Agency: roundtable discussions with the Mayor of Chattanooga, county commissioners, the Hamilton County Mayor; budget workshops; media trainings; informational sessions and a Safe Pedestrian Taskforce workshop. The LACs also participated in a strategic planning retreat to consider sustainability beyond the HKHC grant period. Over time, these empowered residents understood the importance of bringing their voices to the table for discussions with agency and elected officials. Residents helped create an action plan that translated community priorities into steps for residents and officials that resulted in many active living policy and environmental changes. These included more than 30 new community gardens, the Chattanooga Mobile Market to address the lack of access to fresh fruits and vegetables, construction of sidewalks and installation of 19 new bus shelters.

In East Chattanooga, residents simply wanted what existed in other Chattanooga communities: use of a local elementary school playground after school hours so their children would have a safe place to play. LAC members and residents started a conversation with Principal Thirkill, an HKHC partner and champion, exploring access to the Orchard Knob Elementary School playground. That conversation changed the playscape for tens of thousands of children when, through LAC’s grassroots advocacy efforts, an existing Hamilton County Board of Education policy was amended to open all elementary school playgrounds for afterschool use by all residents. Leadership for community-driven change can occur, and is most effective, when it includes those who are most affected.