



## Knox County, TN

▲ Community Example from Chapter 1 of "Lessons for Leaders:"  
*Lessons in Community Capacity Building*

### Community Background

Situated in the foothills of Tennessee's Great Smoky Mountains, the Knox County Health Department's sights were on reducing the many health disparities faced by local children and families. The department assumed leadership for the *Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities* (HKHC) grant and the development of a community-wide strategic plan called Together! Healthy Knox (T!HK) with two broad goals: to provide easy access for physical activity and access to healthy foods. HKHC focused its efforts in three at-risk communities, establishing action teams in the Lonsdale, Inskip and Mascot (urban, suburban and rural, respectively) communities that each preferred to focus first on improvements to their physical environments, rather than on broader systems and policies. Improving the quality of relationships among residents, community leaders, organizations and elected officials would be critical for engaging, training and supporting neighborhood advocates that, for so long, felt neglected and overlooked in decisions affecting their quality of life.

### Community Action

Quite often, well-intentioned professionals from outside of a community face unexpected challenges. This was true in Lonsdale, historically a predominantly African-American community that was experiencing an influx of Hispanic immigrants and African refugees. Developing a community partnership was difficult amongst feelings of resentment, mistrust of government and misunderstandings of cultural differences between each ethnic group. In response, a variety of cross-cultural healthy eating opportunities were created. For example, cooking classes enabled Guatemalan residents to share some of their eating traditions with African-American and

Caucasian residents. Social gatherings created opportunities for sharing life experiences and helped break down cultural barriers. Utilizing the community Elementary school and neighboring park for public meetings enabled Guatemalan families to participate in the community's civic discourse. The creation of a park improvement plan, in partnership with the East Tennessee Community Design Center, brought residents and neighborhood partners together to build a common vision for healthier public space for everyone.

Still, despite efforts to create social cohesion, the partnership experienced resistance. New leadership emerged that did not support community priorities developed from data gathered during the assessment phase. Not wanting to lose momentum nor the engagement of many Lonsdale residents, the partnership focused on the communities' Safe Route to Schools initiative and worked with fourth and fifth graders in the Lonsdale Elementary School. Student leaders across ethnic groups identified barriers faced when walking to school. New maps highlighted the safest (and most fun) commuting routes for children in each corner of Lonsdale. Student leaders created the Lonsdale Walking School Bus and helped to select age-appropriate incentives for the program. As the students outlined safety rules, they noticed that the streets within the Lonsdale school zone did not have a single crosswalk. Some students did not even know what a crosswalk was.

Eventually, a 30-minute meeting with City Mayor Madeline Rogero enabled students to describe their project in Lonsdale and resulted in the installation of 16 crosswalks. In fact, First Lady Michelle Obama highlighted Lonsdale's Walking School Bus at the 2013 *Let's Move!* Conference for Mayors. Remaining flexible and continuously adapting to changing realities on the ground not only improved relationships among Lonsdale residents, but continues to serve as an effective strategy for future community engagement activities.