



## Jefferson County, AL

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

### Community Background

Jefferson County has a rich history of tremendous prosperity linked to iron and coal production. The county also has progressive funders, government agencies and non-profit agencies, such as the United Way of Central Alabama (UWCA), Community Foundation of Greater Birmingham (CFGB) and the Jefferson County Department of Health (JCDH). Yet the county has fallen on very hard economic times in recent years, declaring bankruptcy in 2011 due to mismanagement of its debt. Similarly, the operation of Birmingham City Schools, which serves over 24,000 students, was taken over by the state Board of Education in 2012 because of a severe financial shortfall.

Despite these recent challenges, the Jefferson County Health Action Partnership (HAP) has been an inclusive and effective force for healthier communities during lean and unsteady times. The HAP is a multidisciplinary collaborative of more than 100 organizations focused on improving health conditions throughout the county.

### Community Action

From 2009-2013, UWCA served as lead agency for the *Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities* grant, which they coordinated on behalf of the HAP. The partnership learned to be flexible and adapt to new threats and opportunities. In 2010, the JCDH received one of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Communities Putting Prevention to Work grants for \$13.5 million. While it was clearly a welcome windfall, the grant created a tremendous urgency to hire new staff, and it dramatically increased the scope of HAP's strategies. HAP partners restructured and formalized member roles and anchor organizations (UWCA, JCDH and CFGB), each of which provided staff

support. The partnership adopted Articles of Collaboration to clarify responsibilities and increase transparency. The HAP also restructured around four priority areas and corresponding priority groups that keep partners working in the same strategic directions.

In April 2011, an EF-4 tornado devastated the region, killing 64 people and causing \$2.4 billion of property damage in Birmingham, Tuscaloosa and throughout the area. Dozens of communities were left reeling from the loss of life and property. As a regional resource, UWCA immediately jumped into action, linking community needs with human services and coordinating area funders who wanted to help but did not know how. The storm forced UWCA and other HAP partners to put short-term grant activities on hold until the affected communities began the recovery process. In addition to core partners' preoccupation with the recovery, local government agencies and schools struggled to provide emergency relief while maintaining routine services. Nearly all discretionary public and private resources were redirected to storm-damaged communities. However, during the rebuilding process, HAP partners worked with local governments to incorporate livable community principles into their construction projects, such as Complete Streets designs. In addition, Birmingham was awarded a federal TIGER discretionary grant for its program, entitled "Roads to Recovery: A Complete Streets and Multimodal Transportation System for Greater Birmingham," which incorporated projects from the Red Rock Ridge & Valley Trail System master plan that had been approved previously, but were not funded prior to the tornado.