




Creating Healthy, Vibrant Communities

Improving Lives Through Community Development

FOUNDATION FOR THE MID SOUTH



The Foundation for the Mid South has focused on improving communities in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi and the quality of life for Mid Southerners for over twenty years. In that time, we have fostered the spirit of regional collaboration and attracted and leveraged significant human and financial capital, building the capacity of residents and other stakeholders to better their own communities.

In 2002, we began focusing on comprehensive change strategies, establishing place-based community development efforts in Leflore County, Mississippi, and St. Francis County, Arkansas. Our goal was to use our experience to create a model by which Mid South communities could engage their residents, develop a shared vision among stakeholders, and build the capacity of leaders and organizations to develop solutions that enable communities to grow and prosper.

The model establishes an environment where residents can focus on a big picture plan while simultaneously honing the skills that transform good communities into exceptional ones. One of the most visible outcomes has been their success at leveraging the Foundation's grant dollars. Exposure to new resources and partners have enabled Leflore and St. Francis Counties to attract \$2.30 for every \$1 in grants from the Foundation for the Mid South. The result has been an influx of \$20 million into these communities to support the activities in their strategic plans. The good news is that there is much more in the pipelines expected to reach the communities soon.

Our experiences confirm what we expected at the onset: community change is not easy. It is a complex, long-term investment for all involved. Change does not occur overnight and expectations must be tempered and realistic or engagement and support wanes. The work is labor intensive and sometimes messy, particularly when success is hinged on people of varying perspectives, levels of influence, and expectations working together and reaching consensus on and comfort with the community plan. But we are excited to report that change is occurring and it is a direct result of the commitment, perseverance, and integrity of our partners and the residents.

Nearing a decade of planning, engagement, and implementation, we are sharing many of the activities, stories, and results from one of our place-based efforts: Leflore County, Mississippi. Leflore County's story demonstrates that community improvement is possible, even in rural areas in less than ideal economic conditions. As we provide the framework of our comprehensive community development model, we invite you to share your thoughts and ideas with us. The Foundation for the Mid South is proud to play a role in spreading hope and providing the tools and expanding the knowledge to help better our region from within.

Aisha Nyandoro, Program Officer

“This partnership has really taught us that there is power in organization. People throughout the county have different talents and resources they bring to the collective. We now see what our strengths, weaknesses, and assets are, and we now know the people and the institutions who can help us to bring our plans into reality.”

Dr. Moses Newsome

Former Vice President for Economic Development and Public Service, Mississippi Valley State University
and member of Community of Opportunities Steering Committee, Leflore County





What We've Learned

Three Quick and Important Take-aways

1

To ensure transformative change—change that “sticks”—the community must drive the process. Residents, organizations, and institutions must be engaged from the beginning, investments in time and money must be made on expanding their skills and knowledge, and, most importantly, they have to own and be responsible for the vision.

2

There is no single, static solution for community change. Communities are unique and so are the strategies they will use to achieve their shared vision.

3

The focus should not only be on grant dollars. Money is a necessary element, but just as important are the by-products that occur when those with a stake in the community are brought together and identify and share their ideas, resources, and networks.



Creating Healthy, Vibrant Communities

Growing Communities of Opportunity.

The Foundation for the Mid South's work is focused on improving lives. In order to ensure that people are prosperous and healthy, the places where they live and work should be, too. We believe that improving quality of life begins with revitalizing communities and increasing opportunities for the people, businesses, organizations and institutions in them.

Our vision for the Mid South is built upon growing vibrant communities where residents can find social and economic opportunity—ones where people want to live, work, and play. We are sowing the seeds of change in the Mid South through a comprehensive 5-part community improvement approach that advances key areas of community life and well-being, including the following:

- high-quality education systems
- safe and affordable housing and green spaces to play and exercise
- the economy and jobs that pay a living wage
- strong leadership and improved skills and knowledge
- good physical health, focusing on access to health care and nutritious foods.

Together, these elements are the roots for prosperous and strong communities and each contributes to improving the overall quality of a place and providing opportunities for people to thrive.

Expanding Knowledge. Sharing a Vision and Hope.

Our solution to creating these communities of opportunity is straightforward: build the skills and knowledge of communities to transform themselves. Why? Because it is the people, organizations, institutions, and businesses who must work together to overcome barriers and sustain community improvement efforts.

In addition to strengthening the know-how and capacity of the people, community-wide change also requires comprehensive strategies and a plan for implementing them. Together, these approaches—comprising the Foundation for the Mid South's model of community change—enable communities and residents to construct a unified vision and the means to move their community forward.



5 Ingredients for Healthy, Vibrant Communities

The integration and advancement of all 5 of our community improvement strategies help communities grow and prosper. When each are addressed and producing favorable results, communities and the people, organizations, and institutions in them will thrive.

Education is vital to creating opportunities for people to lead more successful and fulfilling lives. We seek to strengthen education systems and support learning both inside and outside the classroom. In schools throughout the Delta—like Hamburg Junior High School in Arkansas—intensive teacher and administrator training improved test scores and better prepared students for college and a career. About 125 miles north in Little Rock, students are performing better in school because of an afterschool program using music to enrich student learning in math and reading.



Education



**Community
Enrichment**

Our community enrichment efforts are focused on improving the quality of a place. Quality housing, for instance, positively affects health status, crime, and education. We have supported efforts to increase and improve affordable housing, from neighborhood revitalization programs in Forrest City, Arkansas, to replacing housing and apartments destroyed by hurricanes in Biloxi, Mississippi, and Lacombe, Louisiana. But there is more to community enrichment than structures, we care about expanding green spaces and parks, preserving culture, and protecting the environment, as well.



Leadership

Strong and effective leadership is key to moving communities and the region forward. We invest in efforts to build the skills and knowledge of adults and youth, as well as the organizations and institutions on the ground working to create change. An innovative example of one such investment provided loaned executives to the City of New Orleans to help the city navigate recovery and manage resources after Hurricane Katrina. The executives provided immediate expertise on complex recovery issues, but also mentored and built the capacity and skills of the staff and other local leaders for the long term.

Economic Development

The Foundation helps strengthen and grow communities' economies. A comprehensive example of this is occurring in Greenville, Mississippi. Residents came together on their own to voice concern about the future of their community. With the Foundation's support, they created a plan to increase workforce training and education, attract both small and large businesses and grow industry, and market the community to prospective residents and graduating students as a great place to live and work.

Health & Wellness

We partner with communities to improve health status, through efforts that promote healthy living and increase access to health services and facilities. For instance, residents in East Jerusalem, Mississippi, are working together to improve health by increasing the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables in the community. A community leadership team formed partnerships with local farmers and established a farmers' market. This effort is enabling residents from different generations to engage in leadership roles in the community as well as taking responsibility for and action to improve their health.

Leflore County, Mississippi: A Community Full of Opportunities



Focus on One Promising Community

Since 2002, the Foundation for the Mid South has been working in Leflore County, Mississippi, through its place-based community development model—Community of Opportunities. The initiative, supported by the Walton Family Foundation, focuses all 5 of the Foundation for the Mid South’s community improvement strategies in one geographic area to comprehensively address local challenges, create opportunities for social and economic growth, and improve lives.

Like too many counties and parishes in the Delta, Leflore County, Mississippi, has been unable to reach its fullest potential and provide a high quality of life for its 35,000 residents. This is due in part to the decline of its once thriving agri-economy, the lack of high-quality public education, and an inadequate number of jobs that provide a livable wage.

Despite its challenges, the Foundation sees unique promise in Leflore County. Residents, businesses, and local leadership are committed to working together to improve social and economic conditions. The county also possesses an economic base poised for growth—consisting of local corporations such as Viking Corporation, Staple Cotton (Staplcotn) Cooperative Association, and Heartland Catfish, among others.

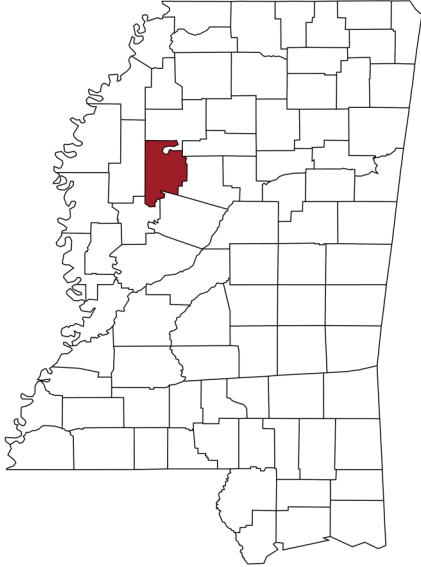
A Structure to Form a Resident-Driven Plan

The Foundation believes community change is not a one-size-fits-all recipe. We believe that each community is unique and, thus, requires its own strategies and plan of action. More importantly, the vision, goals and activities must be derived, owned, and driven by the community to ensure their commitment to long-term change.

The Foundation for the Mid South works directly with the community by establishing relationships with community partners, such as Chambers of Commerce, business and civic leaders, and nearby institutions of higher learning, among others. This resulted in over 500 local stakeholders throughout the county working together to identify community assets, needs, and priorities. Influenced and driven by a diverse number of voices, a strategic plan was created as the road map for the community to achieve its objectives.

A crucial element emphasized during the development of the plan was sustainability. From the start, the Foundation ensured that the people, organizations, and institutions were increasing their capacity—local skills and knowledge—to form and implement solutions that enable the community to successfully achieve its vision.

QuickStats



Leflore County resides in the Delta region of Mississippi. Its county seat is the city of Greenwood and named for Greenwood LeFlore, Principal Chief of the Choctaw Nation as well as Mississippi representative and senator.

Communities	2009 Population
Greenwood	15,808
Itta Bena	1,837
Morgan City	279
Schlater	350
Sidon	554

Source: U.S. Census Bureau: Population Estimates
<http://www.census.gov/popest/cities/SUB-EST2009-4.html>

	Leflore County	Mississippi	United States
Population and Racial Make-Up¹			
	34,563	2,951,996	307,006,550
White	24.9 %	58.3 %	65.1 %
Black	71.4 %	37.2 %	12.9 %
Latino	2.6 %	3.1 %	15.8 %
Other	1.1 %	1.4 %	6.2 %
Per Capita Personal Income²			
	\$26,943	\$30,103	\$39,138
Population Living in Poverty³			
	38.8 %	20.8 %	13.2 %
Unemployment Rate⁴, February 2011			
	14.2 %	10.4 %	9.5%
Educational Attainment⁵			
High School Diploma +	71.3 %	79.6 %	84.9 %
Bachelors +	17.0 %	19.4 %	27.8 %
Adult Obesity⁶			
	38.2 %	35.4 %	27.2 %
Adults Diagnosed with Diabetes⁷			
	13.8 %	10.9 %	5.8 %

The Structure: How Does it Work?

Leflore County Residents' Role

1

Strategic Plan

Partners create the strategic plan that outlines community needs and assets. Action steps are created for the model's 5 community development strategies.

2

Task Force

Partners review proposals to ensure alignment with the plan's action steps.

3

Steering Committee

Partners approve proposals and make formal recommendations to the Foundation.

Foundation for the Mid South's Role

Establishes relationships with community partners and promotes engagement, ensuring diversity of voices and participation of all sectors.

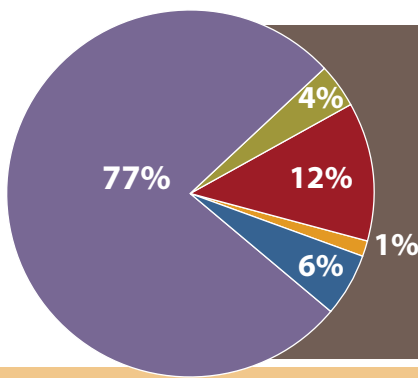
Works with residents, businesses, and institutions to build the initiative's infrastructure and increase local capacity.

Connects community to resources and reviews community proposals for funding.

A Model to Build Model Communities

As the examples in the *Key Accomplishments* section below show, Leflore County is making strides. Community engagement is keeping the strategic plan moving forward. Many results have been immediate and measurable, like new housing or the steady improvement of student test scores. Other results will take more time to see, such as the development of young leaders in the county. Nonetheless, these intangibles are essential building blocks for the future of the community.

Based on our experience in Leflore County, the Foundation for the Mid South believes this approach can be replicated in communities throughout the Mid South. And while strategies will change with geography, one constant will remain. Residents, organizations, and institutions know what is best for their communities and are the most knowledgeable and effective catalysts and advocates for implementing and sticking to the strategic plan—even when times get tough, like the current recession.



\$3.8 million in Foundation for the Mid South Grants

Community Enrichment	Education	Leadership	Economic Development	Health & Wellness
\$213,000	\$2,920,091	\$150,000	\$465,500	\$45,000

In addition to our financial investments, the Foundation has provided ongoing capacity building training focused on leadership development and community engagement.

Key Accomplishments

Ensuring Student Academic Success

- Over 50% of students are performing better on the Mississippi statewide test in reading and math—some showing as much as 20% improvement.
- Training has improved over 400 teachers' and administrators' effectiveness, impacting the academic performance of 5,000 students.

Improving the Quality of a Place

- 22 low- and fixed-income families in Itta Bena live in new, safe, and affordable housing—the first built since 1974. As a result, the local CDC has increased its capacity to manage additional housing and economic development projects.
- Because of Main Street Greenwood, downtown business revenues are growing. Grants for new business façades are helping attract more people to the county's shopping, dining, and entertainment hub.

Strengthening the Economy

- A feasibility study is enabling the county board of supervisors to access \$19 million in state and federal funds for water system improvement and expansion to support residential and commercial growth.
- A county wide marketing plan is underway, aimed at increasing Leflore County's economic competitiveness. By promoting the area to prospective residents, businesses, and industries, the county can grow the number of jobs and income from taxes.

Growing Strong Leaders

- The number of future leaders in business and public service is growing because of the YELL leadership program. Promising young students are actively involved in community issues and tapping into local career opportunities.
- Residents are working together and taking action on critical community issues—like improving health outcomes—and forming partnerships with local institutions like Mississippi Valley State University.

How is Leflore County Stacking Up?


Trends over 6 years among comparable counties and the state

The following chart compares Leflore County with neighboring Coahoma and Sunflower counties—comparable in size and demographics—between 2002 and 2008. We chose to look at 2008 to get a more realistic view of progress, as 2009 marked a sharp downturn in the economy and would not accurately portray the significant positive movement in Leflore County.


	2002	2008	% Change
Population⁸			
Leflore County	36,439	35,090	-3.7 %
Coahoma County	29,846	27,184	-8.8 %
Sunflower County	33,520	30,116	-10.2 %
Mississippi (statewide)	2,858,643	2,940,212	2.9 %
Total Employed⁹			
Leflore County	19,622	19,977	2 %
Coahoma County	13,133	12,183	-7 %
Sunflower County	13,638	13,067	-4 %
Mississippi (statewide)	1,455,078	1,558,262	7 %
Unemployment¹⁰			
Leflore County	9.9 %	9.1 %	-8 %
Coahoma County	8.9 %	9.3 %	5 %
Sunflower County	10.7 %	10.5 %	-1 %
Mississippi (statewide)	6.7 %	6.8%	2 %
Poverty Rate¹¹			
Leflore County	32.2 %	38.8 %	20 %
Coahoma County	28.5 %	32.2 %	13 %
Sunflower County	37.6 %	36.1 %	-4 %
Mississippi (statewide)	18.9 %	20.8 %	10 %




LESS POPULATION SHRINKAGE
(BETTER BY 5 AND 6 % POINTS)



ONLY POSITIVE GROWTH IN EMPLOYED WORKERS
(BETTER BY 6 AND 9 % POINTS)



LARGEST DROP IN UNEMPLOYMENT
(BETTER BY 7 AND 10 % POINTS)



EMPLOYMENT UP, YET POVERTY IS INCREASING AT A HIGHER RATE. LEFLORE COUNTY NEEDS BETTER PAYING, LONG-TERM EMPLOYMENT AND WORK SKILL TRAINING



\$8 Million Leveraged

Because of the Community of Opportunities initiative, our partners in Leflore County have successfully **attracted an additional \$1 for every \$1 granted by the Foundation.**

As a result of \$3.8 million in Foundation for the Mid South support, Leflore County has attracted an additional **\$3.9 million** to improve the community, including efforts to build the skills and knowledge of its people, organizations, and institutions. These figures do not include additional millions currently in the pipeline.



Community Enrichment

Improving the quality of a place

Where people live determines the kinds of opportunities available and shapes their expectations and aspirations. Housing is a key element in the quality of a place and can be a factor in determining school performance, safety, tax rates, and the vibrancy of a neighborhood and community. We support efforts that increase the number and quality of affordable housing and opportunities to expand homeownership.



Expanding Housing and Home Ownership

Glenice is a no-nonsense 75 year-old living in Itta Bena, Mississippi, located 7 miles outside of Greenwood. In 2002 after a stint of respiratory problems, she was diagnosed with sarcoidosis—a disease that causes inflammation in the lungs and other organs. “The apartment I was living in at the time had mold and mildew, and it made it really hard for me to breathe,” she explains. “I lived on the second floor and it was difficult for me to come and go because I have to carry oxygen with me everywhere I go.” On a fixed income, the cost of treating her condition left Glenice and her husband unable to afford a better place to live.

Today, she lives in the first new affordable rental housing constructed in Itta Bena since 1974. “I just love my new home,” beams Glenice. “It’s handicap accessible so I can get around easily, and my breathing is better because now I have central heat and air.” Because of Roosevelt Sanders, Executive Director of the Valley Community Development Corporation (CDC), 22 families living on a fixed income or below 50% of the median family income

have a safe, energy-efficient, affordable place to live.

After partnering with the Foundation for the Mid South, Valley CDC leveraged a grant of \$214,000 into \$3 million to buy the land and build the development. “The community desperately needed housing,” comments Roosevelt. “We took an idea, grew the funds we received from the Foundation, and now we have housing the citizens of the Mississippi Delta can be proud of.”



The Foundation for the Mid South's goal is to ensure that people reside in quality communities, which provide safe, affordable housing and a good standard of living.

To us, Community Enrichment is more than buildings, it is also about establishing a better standard of living. To do this, we support resident-identified projects and opportunities that improve the quality of a place. In Leflore County, we have assisted in the rehabilitation of parks, created walking tracks to encourage exercise, and protected community and cultural assets. These are the additional efforts that help grow good communities into exceptional ones.



Protecting and Growing Community Assets

“Closed for business” is what the sign read on the door of the library in Itta Bena in 2006. Declining revenues forced the Greenwood-Leflore Public Library System to cut its budget and close the branch. This left residents with a 22-mile round-trip journey to the nearest library.

Former Itta Bena mayor Thelma Collins was passionate that residents—especially children—have a place to access books and literature, computers, and free internet. To Thelma, the library symbolizes a gateway to a brighter tomorrow. As a little girl in Itta Bena, she was unable to enter the library because of the color of her skin. “Growing up, this was a building we didn’t come near,” she shares. “For me, reopening the library was important for the next generation of young people, and I knew we could make it a hub of learning and a community gathering place.”

Residents agreed and joined Thelma’s cause, resulting in a library committee that got the ball rolling. A Foundation grant improved the interior and exterior

of the facility, purchased new books and audiovisual materials, and created a technology center. A key partnership with nearby Mississippi Valley State University provides access to a system for trading and special ordering books. Because of residents’ support, the City of Itta Bena now budgets for the library’s operations.

Since reopening, over 400 library cards have been issued. One new library member, 19 year-old Brianci, visits the library to use the computer to search for jobs and print out applications. “I love reading, writing, and browsing the internet,” she says. “The library is very nice and comfortable, and I think it is helping kids with schoolwork and others to better themselves.”

Because residents like Thelma took charge of creating the changes they wished to see in their community, a valuable community asset is once again providing access to knowledge and opportunity to over 2,200 rural residents.



Education

When students excel, our communities will follow

The Foundation concentrates on ensuring schools provide high-quality education and graduate students who are well-prepared for careers in a competitive global economy. Through intensive coaching, teachers and administrators are becoming more effective educators. Regardless of whether it occurs in the classroom enhancing instruction skills or in the office increasing the rigor of the curriculum, our strategies are aimed at creating long-term positive academic growth for students today and tomorrow.



Strengthening Schools in Leflore County

Defabian is an 8 year-old elementary student in Leflore County. He loves sports—mostly football and baseball—and he is an active member of the Boy Scouts. Defabian started the school year making D's and F's and showed little interest in participating in the classroom, particularly during reading lessons. His teacher, Tonya Buford, noted his withdrawal and set up an intervention plan.

The Foundation is helping Ms. Buford and 400 teachers in Leflore County to increase their effectiveness in the classroom. Coaches help her use data and new techniques to improve the teaching and learning process. Intensive training along with better teacher-parent partnerships are increasing students' academic performance. Ms. Buford explains, "Because I'm managing the grouping of students in their ability areas, I have been better able to meet their specific learning needs. As a result," she continues, "my students are becoming more engaged, their grades are improving, and they are showing more interest in learning—not

just because they feel it's required, but because they are seeing that they can do well in school."

Because of Ms. Buford's commitment to academic success, students like Defabian are doing better in school and less likely to fall through the cracks and drop out. "Using the new teaching skills along with the help Defabian's mother is giving," shares Ms. Buford, "he is now making B's and C's. He is doing much better in reading, where he struggled the most at the beginning of the school year."



The Foundation for the Mid South's goal is to ensure that students in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi are given the support and resources they need to achieve academic success.

We support effective and innovative ways to help students learn and flourish academically. Students use the resources and organizations we support—including afterschool programs and community institutions like museums and cultural centers—to reinforce what they learn in the classroom and open their minds to new, educational concepts and experiences. We believe this provides important experiences that produce well-rounded, life-long learners.



Supporting Student Enrichment

Sam Baker, Executive Director of the Boys and Girls Club in Greenwood, opens the Club's doors to 75-120 kids after school is dismissed. "We have kids coming from 9 schools, most of which are within a 3-block walk," he says. "Our first priority is to keep their grades up; we tutor and make sure homework and studying are done before we move on to physical activities."

Sam keeps up with the kids' progress reports and behavior through a partnership with the students' schools. "Since its free for families to send their kids here, we insist that they try hard to make good grades and behave in school."

One student, Brandon, is a bright and energetic 8th grader with an infectious smile. "I used to make B's and C's, but now I'm making all A's and B's," he beams. "I get my work done and then I spend my remaining time managing the Club's Technology Center. I like computers." When asked about college, he is quick to answer, "I want to study technology, math, and science."

The Technology Center that Brandon manages consists of 10 computers with software ranging from math and reading tutorials to youth leadership and character development. A grant from the Foundation enabled Sam to purchase the computers and printers as well as hire three staff members. "At some point we'll have to start charging for our service," Sam says. "But for now, because of the grant, we are serving a bunch of kids who can't afford an afterschool program and they are doing better in school and at home as a result."

Oftentimes, what is learned or reinforced outside the classroom can have a tremendous impact on student learning. That is why the Foundation invests in enrichment activities, like afterschool programs and community institutions such as museums. Both provide students additional opportunities to deepen their learning, either through tutoring and homework assistance or practical hands-on experiences.



Leadership

There is no stopping an entire community of strong leaders

We believe that leaders exist in communities at all levels, from those who hold formal leadership positions, like a mayor, to students volunteering on community projects. An inclusive process and constant outreach allow all in Leflore County who wish to contribute to actively participate. Resident engagement and leadership training instills the know-how to overcome obstacles, an appreciation of diversity, and an understanding of the importance of residents' own contributions to making their community better.



Nurturing Tomorrow's Leaders Today

Reginald is a bright young man who plans to attend college after graduating high school. Like too many other promising students in the Delta, he plans to get a degree and expects to move elsewhere to find better opportunities. When aspiring young people and potential leaders—like Reginald—leave the Delta, it handicaps communities' actions toward long-term improvement.

The Greenwood-Leflore Chamber of Commerce and various local professionals recognized that including youth in the challenges and opportunities in their community today is a surefire way to prepare for the future. The plan was to create a program to prepare and retain the next generation of young Leflore County leaders in education, business, and public service.

Through the Young Emerging Leaders of Leflore County (YELL) program, high school students in the county's public and private schools participate in leadership training activities and mentoring programs with local

business people and elected officials. "Our youth are the future of our community," said Beth Stevens, Executive Director of the Greenwood-Leflore Chamber of Commerce. "Young people today are the leaders, entrepreneurs, and innovators of tomorrow; we want them to know that they can be successful right here in Greenwood, Mississippi."

In its second year, YELL has expanded the leadership skills of over 50 students from local high schools. Students sharpen their interviewing skills and learn about what opportunities are available to them locally. "This program has really helped me see what opportunities exist for me here at home," says Reginald. "I've become more sociable with people throughout my community, and I feel more confident, particularly when it comes to writing a resume and interviewing for a good job."

The Foundation for the Mid South's goal is to ensure communities benefit from strong and effective leadership, allowing them to grow, seize opportunity, and overcome challenges.

Leadership development must cross the barriers of age, race and socioeconomic status. It also needs to encompass all sectors of the community, from concerned residents, to government and business leaders, to nonprofit and faith-based organizations, among others. The processes and activities driven by Leflore County stakeholders are honing leadership skills—helping them to be more unified in their vision and contribute to the betterment of the community.



Strengthening Leadership Wherever It is Found

Nonprofit organizations—in their role to strengthen the common good—fill vital service gaps to residents and communities; gaps that the for-profit and government sectors cannot effectively bridge. Nonprofits are perfectly suited to address diversity and equity issues and bring residents together to address important public issues. And when these organizations are performing efficiently and effectively, they are better stewards of the dollars entrusted them and can have an even greater impact in their communities.

The Foundation for the Mid South provided experts to conduct a series of seminars aimed at increasing the performance and accountability of nonprofits in Leflore County. Executive directors, staff, and board members of all nonprofits in the county were invited to participate for no charge in sessions ranging from learning proven fundraising strategies, bettering financial management, to improving governance.

Theresa Dent, Program Coordinator at Delta State University, attended each of the meetings. She says, “I was interested in learning more about running a nonprofit organization; particularly, I want to provide assistance to my church’s community outreach work. Each of the topics was helpful, but I really benefited from the sessions on budgeting and programmatic responsibilities. I also started working with our board, making sure they were more knowledgeable about their specific roles and responsibilities.”



Economic Development

Growing and strengthening the economy

A good economy spurs job creation, bolsters consumer confidence and fuels spending. Leflore County already has a diverse set of employers including manufacturing, agribusiness, entertainment and cuisine, and cultural tourism. Furthermore, while many downtowns have too many vacant properties, local partnerships focusing on increasing tourism and small business revenue are creating a vibrant and bustling Downtown Greenwood.



Downtown Greenwood in an Upswing

Establishing a thriving business district is important to re-energizing a community. When a community invests in creating beautiful areas to attract customers and new businesses, they are investing in boosting the local economy.

Lise Foy, former Executive Director of Main Street Greenwood explains, "Downtown Greenwood went through a period of economic downturn, and we're turning that around. In recent years," she continues, "several of our downtown buildings have been renovated and, through the Foundation's support, we're extending these improvements even further. By helping merchants improve their storefronts, more businesses are choosing to relocate to the area. When you walk in downtown Greenwood today, you see more foot traffic and really interesting retail and service-oriented businesses. Our downtown is coming alive."

Five years ago in a last effort to save his ministry, Pastor Collins moved his church from a rural area to the

Johnson-Carrolton section of Greenwood—home to many minority-owned businesses and literally across the train tracks from the downtown business district. While cleaning the parking lot one day, a passer-by informed him of Main Street Greenwood's façade improvement program. "After we received a grant," says Pastor Collins, "we were able to transform an eyesore into a beautiful church. People have told me it brings the block to life and really beautifies the neighborhood."

When asked whether the exterior improvement helped his church, he talks about how the congregation is happy and how the church used money intended for the façade for further interior improvements and community programs. Pastor Collins explains, "Because the building looks nice and catches attention, we've grown and had a tremendous amount of visitors. We've also seen fewer people standing around on the corner or littering. It's all stopped because people want to live in a nice place."

The Foundation for the Mid South's goal is to ensure communities benefit from strong and effective leadership, allowing them to grow, seize opportunity, and overcome challenges.

One of the county's goals is to attract new businesses and residents. One way the county is doing this is by creating a marketing plan to better promote its assets and offerings. In other efforts, the Foundation partnered with local stakeholders, including business owners and the Leflore County Board of Supervisors, to prepare the county for commercial and residential expansion—something vital to the future growth of the area.



Leveraging Dollars for Water

The Leflore County Board of Supervisors understands the impact water has on the economy. Quality water and sanitation systems protect the health of residents and provide new income opportunities by attracting business and industry. While the local population centers have the most basic water services, much of the county does not possess adequate water infrastructure or services.

Sam Abraham, the Leflore County Chancery Court Clerk, approached the Foundation about helping the county tap into millions of government dollars to upgrade and expand the water system. “We couldn’t get federal or state funding to improve our water system until we conducted a feasibility study on the current water quality and needs,” Sam explains. “The county just didn’t have the \$90,000 to spend on the study, but desperately needed it so we can provide safe water to residents throughout the county and boost the economy.”

The Foundation provided a grant for the study and the county is already working to address the findings in order to secure funding for implementation. “We’re already working with representatives from Mississippi USDA Rural Development and the North Central Planning District to secure the \$19 million we’ll need in state and federal funding. Investing in improving our water systems makes perfect sense for the future of our county... it’s just good business.”



Health & Wellness

A community is only as healthy as the people who live there

When residents are healthy, the prognosis is very good for the future of their communities, too. In Leflore County, though, with skyrocketing rates of diabetes and obesity, too many unemployed and low-income residents are unable to afford the health care they need. The Foundation supports those who are on the front lines of increasing access to health services, working to improve the health status in the county and protecting residents, who may be an illness or accident away from health and financial ruin.



Expanding Access to Health Services

Leflore County has a shortage of medical professionals, falling below the desired benchmark of one primary care provider for every 3,500 residents. Too few providers combined with the lack of a health clinic to serve low- to moderate income families left many working, underinsured families without access to quality health care.

Clifton, a retired resident and member of the Community of Opportunities steering committee, was one of many wanting to bring a state-of-the-art medical clinic to the community. "We wanted Leflore County to have a 21st Century facility to ensure everyone could receive medical services and health education," says Clifton.

"After the COO steering committee created a strategic plan for health and wellness in the county," Clifton explains, "several of us started working on our own toward establishing the Leflore Community Health Center. Because we were on the Foundation's steering committee, we benefited from the technical assistance

we received—it really helped the planning and development of our project," he says. "It was the spark we needed to get started."

Today, construction of the Leflore Community Health Center is complete and the clinic will be hiring soon. During planning and construction, Clifton's group built strong relationships with nearby hospitals and hosted health seminars and screenings for residents. "We have a lot of people excited about the clinic," he said. "We have already started to raise awareness about the importance of healthy behaviors and the need for regular check-ups to ensure good health."

The Foundation for the Mid South's goal is to ensure communities benefit from strong and effective leadership, allowing them to grow, seize opportunity, and overcome challenges.

We support certain projects that leverage our funding with local resources or sweat equity to address specific, resident-identified needs. This approach enables residents to have a stake in and share responsibility for improving their health. Some examples of past efforts include walking tracks and parks on land donated by residents or businesses, improved water drainage to reduce instances of the West Nile Virus, and a community garden to increase access to nutritious food.



Changing Attitudes and Behaviors

Recently, the last grocery store in Itta Bena, Mississippi, closed, denying 1,800 residents nearby access to fresh fruits and vegetables. The closure of the Big Star Supermarket forced people, like Ruthie Robinson, to drive 11 miles to the nearest Walmart to buy food. “You really have to plan your meals or otherwise you’ll drive 20 miles round trip just to get what you need for dinner,” says Ruthie. “This really affects our older residents in the community who can’t drive or rely on others to help them shop and get groceries.”

With diabetes and obesity escalating in the state, residents spanning several generations came together to address the well-being of the small community. Through a partnership with the Foundation and Communities of All Ages, a leadership team of residents ranging in age from 14 to 80 formed to improve local health outcomes. One of the first orders of business was establishing the first community garden.

Ruthie is a member of the resident leadership team that helped to get the garden started. “Without easy access to fresh fruits and vegetables,” she says, “many relied on what they could get, which tended to be less nutritional and contain lots of sodium and preservatives.”

When asked about how the garden was started, Ruthie says, “Lots of folks got involved. Residents, church groups, and students and professors from nearby Mississippi Valley State University lent a hand. Yes, we’re growing and providing fresh fruits and vegetables, but because of this effort we are now being called on to get residents of all ages involved with a number of other community issues.”

On the Right Path to a Better Tomorrow

A Change for the Better

Through the Community of Opportunities initiative, the Foundation for the Mid South is enabling the residents of Leflore County to develop solutions that allow their communities to grow and prosper.

The outlook is positive for the future of the county. Over 50% of the students are doing better in school and on statewide achievement tests because districts have more effective teachers and administrators. Multiple activities are underway to stimulate the economy by aggressively attracting new business and residents. The number and engagement of adult and youth leaders is on the rise, empowering more residents to take charge addressing local issues and the changes they wish to see. And these are just a few of the many efforts aimed at expanding knowledge and improving lives in Leflore County.

What is on the Horizon for Leflore County?

The lack of a highly-skilled workforce has been one barrier to the county's success at attracting new business. By partnering with local high schools, trade schools and universities, and businesses, residents can receive the skill training they need to be competitive in the job market. A highly-trained workforce can help bring jobs, particularly in green industries, like bio-fuel, perfectly suited for rural areas

like Leflore County. These investments in the capacity of the workforce and prospective new industries can position Leflore County as an economic leader in the Mid South Delta.

Growing a Stronger Mid South

Long-term change in our region can be difficult and messy business for communities and the groups helping them. No one organization or group can ever hope to achieve on its own the kinds of results Leflore County is working toward. The process requires the active engagement of stakeholders: residents, businesses, civic leaders, and other partners within and outside the community. With this understanding, the Foundation has synthesized 7 years of successes and mistakes into a single comprehensive community change model appropriate for the Mid South, its people, and their needs.

We hope the actions and stories in this document demonstrate how the Community of Opportunities initiative is helping Leflore County move forward. We believe this approach can be replicated in and benefit other communities throughout the Mid South, as well. We encourage those interested in improving their community or funders considering community development work in the Mid South and beyond to contact the Foundation for the Mid South and learn more about Community of Opportunities.

Through effective and long-term partnership, engagement, and strategies, we can all play a role in making the Mid South stronger—one community at a time.



ENDNOTES

- 1 U.S. Census Bureau's State and County QuickFacts 2009 data: Leflore County, Mississippi (<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/28/28083.html>).
U.S. Census Bureau's State and County QuickFacts 2009 data: USA (<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/00000.html>).
- 2 Bureau of Economic Analysis Bearfacts: 2008 data (<http://www.bea.gov/regional/bearfacts/countybf.cfm>).
- 3 U.S. Census Bureau's State and County QuickFacts 2009 data: Leflore County, Mississippi (<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/28/28083.html>).
U.S. Census Bureau's State and County QuickFacts 2009 data: USA (<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/00000.html>).
- 4 Mississippi Department of Labor Security's Labor market Data Publication, February 2011 (<http://www.mdes.ms.gov/Home/docs/LMI/MAPS/uratesmap.pdf>).
- 5 U.S. Census Bureau, 2007-2009 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates: S1501 Educational Attainment (http://www.fastfacts.census.gov/servlet/STGeoSearchByListServlet?_lang=en&_ts=320243060644).
- 6 Leflore County data for 2008: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: National Diabetes Surveillance System (<http://apps.nccd.cdc.gov/DDTSTRS/default.aspx>)
Mississippi and U.S. data for 2009: U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (<http://apps.nccd.cdc.gov/brfss/display.asp?cat=OB&yr=2009&qkey=4409&state=US>).
- 7 Leflore County data for 2008: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: National Diabetes Surveillance System (<http://apps.nccd.cdc.gov/DDTSTRS/default.aspx>).
Mississippi data for 2008: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: National Diabetes Surveillance System (<http://apps.nccd.cdc.gov/DDTSTRS/default.aspx>).
U.S. data for 2008: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics (<http://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/statistics/prev/national/figage.htm>).
- 8 U.S. Census Bureau - Population Estimate (<http://www.census.gov/popest/estimates.html>).
- 9 Bureau of Labor Statistics - Local Area Unemployment (<http://www.bls.gov/lau/>). Not seasonally adjusted.
- 10 Bureau of Labor Statistics - Local Area Unemployment (<http://www.bls.gov/lau/>). Not seasonally adjusted.
- 11 U.S. Census Bureau - Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates - (<http://www.census.gov/did/www/saipe/>). The 3 year moving average poverty rate includes the average of the particular year and the two prior years.

Download this report at www.fndmidsouth.org.

For print copies, contact the Foundation for the Mid South at 601.355.8167 or info@fndmidsouth.org.

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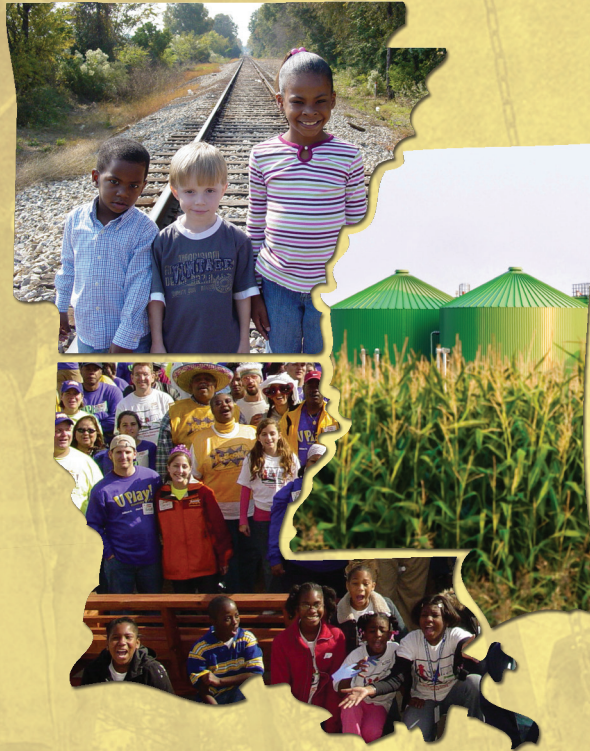
Why is **Community Development** important in the Mid South?

It makes sense that in order for people to be prosperous and healthy, the places where they live and work should be, too. The Foundation works to ensure residents develop the knowledge and tools to revitalize their communities.

Nearly 20% of all Mid Southerners live below the poverty level.

1 in 5 Mid Southerners

do not graduate from high school, resulting in a greater number low-paying jobs, high poverty rates, and an inadequately trained workforce.



The annual median household income in the region is **\$32,000 less than the rest of the nation**, showing the importance of creating jobs that pay adequate wages.

1 in 3 adults in the Mid South

is obese, which leads to critical health issues like diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease—the number one cause of death in the region.

Creating Healthy, Vibrant Communities shares the Foundation for the Mid South's approaches to improving quality of life in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi. We believe that vibrant communities are those where residents can find social and economic opportunity—ones where people want to live work and play. Our work integrates 5 community improvement strategies to help Mid South communities grow and prosper.

Community Enrichment | Education | Leadership | Economic Development | Health & Wellness