

EXCERPTS FROM THE DRAFT CFGB ANNUAL REPORT

Strategic Priority: Regional Cooperation

Initiative: Regional Cooperation – Jefferson Co. Councilors Coalition

Headline: We're All in This Together

Subhead: City Councilors in Jefferson County are building trust one city at a time

Photo: Jennifer Andress, Casey Middlebrooks and Jesse Matthews at High Ore line

INTRO For the last six years, the Community Foundation has been a champion of regional cooperation. Without it, many of the needs of our communities will go unmet. The Foundation believes that a more united region is a stronger region. But the greater Birmingham area consists of 35 different municipalities in Jefferson County alone, and for decades those cities have either operated in silos or competed with one another.

“With 35 municipalities, there’s no one that speaks for the region,” says Christopher Nanni, president and CEO of the Community Foundation. “The cities with this fragmentation are at a disadvantage now that the economy has changed from industrial to one centered on information technology.”

That’s why the Foundation was eager to support a group of Jefferson County city councilors who were ready to work together as a team.

In 2019, a group of city councilors from Hoover, Birmingham, Mountain Brook, Bessemer, Vestavia Hills and Homewood started meeting monthly – at first just to get to know one another and later to discuss issues such as recycling, teen vaping, and Census participation. The pandemic moved the meetings to Zoom, but that didn’t slow down the group’s efforts. In fact, the councilors were communicating nearly every day as they all traversed tumultuous times.

“One of the biggest benefits I’ve received from the group is being able to communicate with councilors,” says Hoover City Councilor Casey Middlebrooks. “It’s helped me to tackle some issues that we may be dealing with in Hoover that other councilors from other municipalities may have already dealt with. We can share ideas.”

Middlebrooks helped start the group after he was inspired by a similar collaborative effort among Jefferson County mayors. The Jefferson County Mayors Association is a network of all the mayors of the county’s municipalities. One of the group’s most noteworthy accomplishments was the adoption of the Good Neighbor Pledge, an agreement among the mayors not to pilfer businesses from one another that was facilitated by the Community Foundation.

At the suggestion of Jefferson County Commissioner Steve Ammons and with the help of the Community Foundation, the city councilors created a formal organization – the Jefferson County Councilor Coalition (JC3).

After a deep dive into the various issues affecting our region, JC3 has set two main goals for 2022 – trail expansion and public transit growth. The group hopes to push the buildout of the Red Rock Trail System.

“I’m a huge quality of life advocate and a huge believer in ‘If you build it, they will come,’” Homewood City Councilor Jennifer Andress says. “We all feel like trails bring people to the area.”

The group also advocates for growing the region’s microtransit options as well as changes to Alabama’s model for funding transit.

“The timing and urgency of this issue are extremely important in 2022 because of The World Games, and the need to move large numbers of people across the region expeditiously,” Andress says.

Alabama is one of only four states in the country that doesn’t offer state funds for public transportation. But JC3 hopes to change this by working together.

“If only Hoover or only the city of Birmingham was advocating for funding transit at a state level it may not have as much of a voice as all municipalities in Jefferson County supporting this,” says Middlebrooks, who is president of the Jefferson County City Councilors Coalition. “But there’s power in numbers.”

Jesse Matthews has served on the Bessemer City Council for more than 23 years and his experience has taught him that cooperation – or lack thereof -- can make or break a region.

“It drives businesses away from the region when there’s a lot of separation,” Matthews says. But when municipalities come together, he says, “It’s good for housing, it’s good for education, and it’s good for job growth.”

It’s true that metro areas with structures in place that promote cooperation tend to have more job growth, more population growth, more labor force participation, a higher median household income, and a lower poverty rate.

“But we can only move at the speed of trust,” Nanni says. That’s why groups such as the Mayors Association and the Jefferson County City Councilors Coalition are essential. These groups aren’t only tackling issues, they’re building relationships.

“Each step forward increases trust,” Andress says. “And trust will propel our region forward.”

Strategic Priority: Overcoming Persistent Poverty

Initiative: Greater Birmingham Community of Hope (Casey Family Programs Partnership)

Headline: Safe at Home

Subhead: A community of hope is focused on keeping children safe at home

Photo: Alice Westery at Youth Towers home

For 13 years Alice Westery served as an independent living program coordinator for the Department of Human Resources in Jefferson County. During that time, she noticed that many of the young people she worked with who had aged out of the foster care system would end up back in her office with no place to live.

So, she prayed. “I said, ‘Lord somebody needs to do something about this.’ Then I thought, ‘Duh! Why do you think they’re coming back to you?!’”

She decided that she should be the person to do something, and in 2011 she founded Youth Towers, an organization dedicated to helping young people age 19 to 26 secure and maintain safe and affordable housing. In addition to providing transitional housing and rent assistance, the programs at Youth Towers teach money management skills and help young people find employment. If someone needs work boots for a construction job or bus passes to get to work -- Youth Towers helps with that, too. In short, Youth Towers seeks to offer young people the knowledge and tools they need to navigate adulthood.

“We holistically look at all of their needs,” Westery says of the wrap-around services her organization offers.

“Those young people, many times, had to raise themselves,” Westery says. “Youth Towers is like that other parent, that parent that’s going to make sure that every resource is accessible.”

Youth Towers is one of several grassroots organizations addressing poverty that last year received competitive grants from the Community Foundation of Greater Birmingham’s Community of Hope partnership.

“Youth Towers is thankful that the Community Foundation gets it,” Westery says.

One of the Foundation’s top priorities is to overcome persistent poverty in our region. In 2021, the Community Foundation began working with Casey Family Programs to convene a coalition of local residents, organizations, service providers, and government officials to address poverty and family supports head on. Casey Family Programs is a national foundation that works to influence long-lasting improvements to the well-being of children, families and the communities where they live. Using Casey’s Community of Hope model, this partnership is working to develop a robust, collaborative approach for improving systems of support for families in the Greater Birmingham area.

When it comes to poverty in our community the numbers are harrowing. Alabama is the sixth poorest state in the U.S., with 24% of Alabama children living below the federal poverty threshold. Although Birmingham has made some strides in recent years, data from 2009 to 2019 shows that out of the top 53 largest metros in the country, Birmingham is 40th in the relative poverty rate change and 53rd (dead last) in the change in the relative poverty gap between whites and people of color. That's why the Community of Hope coalition also seeks to address childhood poverty through a race equity lens.

"Persistent poverty is persistent because it's infused into the way society is structured," says Gus Heard-Hughes, vice president of programs at the Community Foundation. "It's a challenge to take on, but with this partnership with Casey we have the opportunity to bring people together around innovative, community-scale strategies."

Despite the staggering statistics regarding poverty in Alabama, Michael Dailey, senior director of strategic consulting at Casey Family Programs, is hopeful about Birmingham's future.

"There's a lot of strength in that community," Dailey says, noting the hard work of local organizations and the City of Birmingham Mayor's Office's commitment to the cause of eradicating child poverty. "We want to help you build on your strengths."

The coalition has been intentional about bringing residents with experience in the child welfare system to the table not just to share their stories, but to help with planning and decision making, too.

Casey Family Programs has a vision of a world where children can stay out of the foster care system and stay safe at home. But to make that dream a reality, poverty must be tackled first.

"Poverty stressors are often factors that contribute to children coming into care," Dailey explains. "So, if we can focus our efforts further upstream, maybe we can prevent the need for child protection involvement."

Westery has seen this firsthand. Many of the young people Youth Towers serves are also parents. So as Westery helps her clients, she's also helping their children.

"We're not going to have those babies outside," she says. "It takes a village to raise a child, but it takes more than a village. It takes a community of hope, a community working to make sure that families are strengthened and that families do not have to rely on the systemic world to get by but instead have the best quality of life."

Strategic Priority: Fostering Equity and Inclusion

Field of Interest Fund: Instruments of Hope Unity Fund in conjunction with CFGF Competitive Grants

Headline: Second Chances

Subhead: *Reset offers a path to a new beginning*

Photo: DA Danny Carr in front of Courthouse

Jefferson County District Attorney Danny Carr is someone who has defied the odds.

“I’m from Ensley,” Carr says, “a community where most people would not say you’ll one day be the district attorney. But by the grace of God, I’m here.”

Sometimes to rise above the tough hand you’ve been dealt, you must also be given a second chance. And that’s exactly what Reset Jefferson County, a program spearheaded by District Attorney Carr, is all about.

Reset keeps young people who’ve been arrested for low-level, non-violent crimes out of jail and puts them on the path to a new beginning. First-time offenders have the option to stay out of the court system by participating in a community-based program that includes workshops and counseling to hold them accountable and to address the underlying issues that led to criminal behavior.

“With Reset, it gives a young man the opportunity to truly learn the error of his ways,” Carr says.

In Jefferson County, more than 500 people aged 17-24 are arrested each year for low-level felonies, such as drug possession and petty theft. Once a felony conviction goes on a young person’s record, it can impact everything.

“A lot of the guys and a lot of the families that I grew up with are incarcerated or stumbling through life because of a stupid mistake they made as a young kid,” Carr says. “They can’t find adequate housing or keep a job because that mistake continues to creep up.”

Reset would change this. Inspired by a similar program in New York, Reset is a partnership between the Jefferson County District Attorney’s office and Alabama Appleseed Center for Law and Justice.

“There are societal costs to punishing and incarcerating people who aren’t dangerous,” says Carla Crowder, executive director of Alabama Appleseed. “The people who will be eligible to participate in Reset aren’t dangerous, so we shouldn’t spend those precious resources, nor should we saddle them with the consequences of a felony. Reset gives them an opportunity to be treated with dignity.”

In 2021, in partnership with the Instruments of Hope Unity Fund, the Community Foundation awarded Alabama Appleseed a \$75,000 grant in support of the program to hire a project coordinator.

Zhaundra Jones of the Community Foundation says Reset perfectly aligns with the Foundation's mission to dismantle inequitable systems. In 2019, 75 percent of people arrested were Black residents, a significantly disproportionate number.

"With Reset, this new policy will create a different narrative around what these people do or don't deserve," Jones says. "And that's super powerful."

Reset isn't an easy way out for those who have committed crimes or for the city. Participating in the program will require dedication just as operating the program will.

"That's the hard work," Carr says. "The easy work is to not do this program and just let things be as they may."