

Alabama Fit: Top 5 by '25

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Overall Goal: The overall goal of “Alabama Fit: Top 5 by ‘25” is to cut Alabama’s obesity rate in half by the year 2025, moving it from third worst to best, thereby achieving substantial improvement in the rates of obesity-related chronic diseases. We will accomplish this through a comprehensive set of Policy, Systems, and Environment (PSE) level strategies developed at the community level. Key to our approach is a community-driven, citizen-engaged planning process that focuses on people rather than programs.

Problem: Alabama currently has the third worst obesity rate in the nation at 35.7%.¹ In addition, there are stark disparities in the obesity rates across counties, with the lowest rates below 30% and the highest at nearly 50%.² These disparities in obesity track other disparities in health, education, economic opportunity, the built environment, and general community well-being. Such disparities are mirrored in Alabama’s largest city, Birmingham. Across the 99 neighborhoods that comprise the city, substantial health and social disparities result from a range of social determinants (e.g., poverty, education, housing, culture, food access) acting at critical points in the life course (e.g., prenatal, early childhood, adolescence, older adulthood).

Understanding and addressing these complex interactions in practical ways means going beyond limited attempts to address one or two research-identified problems. Effective solutions are best derived from equitable academic-community partnerships involving stakeholders from the policy, systems, and environment domains - community members, government, organizational representatives, businesses, and academic experts – all contributing expertise and sharing decision-making and ownership. To achieve lasting solutions to the obesity epidemic, *comprehensive and coordinated* PSE approaches are needed.

Approach/Work Plan: We propose a comprehensive, community-driven policy, systems, environment (PSE) approach to understanding and addressing the issue of obesity. For example, to cut obesity rates in half will require involvement of health systems, government, local and state economic interests, education systems, and community organizations. These represent *systems* that may need to effect change in order to achieve the goal. Similarly, achieving the goal may require *environmental* changes – changes to the built environment such as more/improved green spaces, complete streets, better zoning. Finally, achieving the goal may require that certain *policy* changes be enacted by government to support the effort.

However, rather than study obesity from the outside and attempt to decide upon and enact these changes from the top down, our **overall approach** is to start at the community level, working with communities to find the best way forward. In this approach, those who live with the burdens of obesity in their neighborhoods serve as the experts on what is best for them. Academic partners like UAB serve as equal collaborators who have access to unique knowledge and resources that can be helpful (e.g., UAB MHRC on social determinants, the School of Engineering on smart, sustainable cities, the School of Business on economic development). Figure 1 illustrates this approach.

A strength of this approach is that models and infrastructure for it already exist. The UAB Minority Health & Health Disparities Research Center (MHRC) has created robust academic-community partnerships in several Birmingham communities through the Building Healthy Communities Project; throughout the state, especially Alabama’s Black Belt, through projects such as the Deep South Network for Cancer Control and Racial and Ethnic Approaches to

Community Health (REACH) 2010; and throughout the Mid-South region through the Mid-South Transdisciplinary Collaborative Center for Health Disparities Research.

Outline of Work: Building on our existing infrastructure and academic-community partnerships, this project will develop effective, community-driven methods to cut the obesity rate in each of Alabama’s 67 counties in half by the year 2025. To achieve this, we will engage our existing network of academic-community teams across Alabama and the Mid-South to supply experience, expertise, and connections to resources. Starting with Birmingham, we will:

Step 1 – Expand Academic-Community Coalitions: With existing, diverse academic-community coalitions across Birmingham, we are well-positioned for quick expansion.

Step 2 – Assessments: Coalitions will develop priority areas and organize into working groups. Each working group will conduct a systematic assessment to identify resources, needs, and best practices in Policy, Systems, and Environment, paying particular attention to social determinants and creating leverage at critical points in the life course (e.g., childhood, transition to adulthood, older age, etc.).

Step 3 – Develop Community Action Plans (CAP): Working from the step 2 assessments, coalitions will develop an overall goal in alignment with cutting their local obesity rate in half. Once the goal has been agreed upon, the next step will be to develop specific PSE objectives focused on achieving the goal. The objectives will refer to specific social determinants changes at the policy, systems, and environment levels to produce measurable results. Next, strategies will be developed, explaining how the coalition will reach each objective. Finally, a CAP will be created, describing in detail how the strategies will be implemented to accomplish the objectives.

Step 4 – Statewide Dissemination: We will repeat the process in communities throughout Alabama, developing CAPs for individual communities, linking them to local, regional, and state resources needed to accomplish goals. As communities develop plans, commonalities will be worked into regional plans and, eventually, statewide plans. By starting at the community level and aggregating ideas and approaches across communities, we will achieve tailored solutions where necessary and common solutions where applicable, while simultaneously building the relationships and trust necessary to cut Alabama’s overall obesity rate in half.

Outcomes: Short-Term: Mobilization and expansion of existing established coalitions and identification of community leaders; Community Action Plans (CAP); Mid-Term: Specific PSE changes – Although our approach requires that final outcomes be decided in partnership with communities who will implement the work, we anticipate that specific, measurable improvement targets (e.g., 35% increase in green space, 35% increase in community-owned businesses, passage of a complete streets ordinance) will be set by each neighborhood and shared across neighborhoods as appropriate Long-Term: Statewide replication and integration resulting in Alabama being in the top 5 least obese states by 2025.

Figure 1. Academic-Community Partnerships to Address Complex Issues



Potential Team Members

Inside UAB

School of Business
School of Education
School of Engineering - Sustainable Smart
Cities Program
School of Medicine - Minority Health and
Health Disparities Research Center
Comprehensive Cancer Center – Deep South
Network for Cancer Control

Outside UAB

State & Local Government Associations

Alabama Cooperative Extension System
Alabama Department of Childhood
Education
Alabama Department of Public Health
Alabama Department of Transportation
Bessemer Park and Recreation
Bessemer Police Department
Birmingham Botanical Gardens
Birmingham City Council
Birmingham City Schools
Birmingham Education Foundation
Birmingham Firehouse #8
Birmingham Park and Recreation
Birmingham–Jefferson County Transit
Authority
City of Bessemer
City of Birmingham
Dallas County Commission
East Birmingham Neighborhood
Association
Governor’s Alabama Rural Action
Commission
Governor’s Office of Minority Affairs
Governor’s Office of Workforce
Development
Housing Authority of Birmingham District
Jefferson County Commission
Jefferson County Committee for Economic
Opportunity
Jefferson County Department of Health
Jefferson County Health Action Partnership

Jefferson County Regional Planning
Commission
Regional Planning Commission of Greater
Birmingham

National & State Organizations

American Cancer Society
Alabama Champions for Healthy Active
Schools
Alabama Conference of Black Mayors
Literacy Council of Alabama
World Conference of Black Mayors
American Heart Association

Academic Partners

Alabama A & M University
Alabama State University
Birmingham City Schools
Deep South Network for Cancer Control
Lawson State Community College
Miles College
Montgomery Public Schools
Oakwood University
Tuskegee University

Community Organizations

ACT
Black People Run, Bike and Swim
Black Belt Community Foundation
Cahaba Valley Healthcare
Community Foundation of Greater
Birmingham

Dannon Project
Determined 2 Be Mentoring
East Lake Market
Freshwater Land Trust
Hayes K-8 School
Health and Wellness Education Center of
Livingston
Independent Presbyterian Church
Jones Valley Urban Farm
Kingston Community Coalition
Mineral District Medical Society
Morton-Simpson Village
Norwood Resource Center
P.E.E.R Inc.
REV Birmingham's Urban Food Project
Safe Routes to Schools
STAIR (Start the Adventures in Reading)
United Way of Central Alabama
UAB MHRC Young Professionals Board
Woodlawn United
YMCA of Greater Birmingham

Corporate Partners

ArchitectureWorks
Birmingham Business Alliance
Selma Air

References

1. State of Obesity: Adult Obesity in the United States. 2017. Accessed 4/29/2018 at <https://stateofobesity.org/adult-obesity/>.
2. County Health Rankings: Adult Obesity. 2018. Accessed 4/29/2018 at <http://www.countyhealthrankings.org/app/alabama/2018/measure/factors/11/data>.