

CONCEPT TITLE: *Healthy Birmingham 2023*

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The United States ranks near the bottom of developed countries for virtually every metric of health from life expectancy to percent with disabilities to infant mortality. Within the United States, Alabama ranks near the bottom of states for virtually every measure of health also including life expectancy and infant mortality, making Alabama from a health perspective more like a third world country than a first world country. In fact, Mexico and Vietnam have higher life expectancies than Alabama.

Birmingham, Alabama and the rest of Jefferson county despite being home to UAB, a world-class healthcare, biomedical research, and education institution, fare no better than the Alabama average in health metrics. **The problem to be addressed by this Grand Challenge is the poor health from birth to death in the city and environs of Birmingham. The goal of the Grand Challenge is to self-consciously make Birmingham the healthiest city in Alabama within 5 years** (hence the title), and by doing so provide a model, guide, and inspiration for the rest of Alabama to self-consciously improve its health. Ultimately we would hope to provide a model, guide, and inspiration for the rest of the country as well.

There is a precedent and guide for such an effort. The town of Gröningen in the northern Netherlands has done exactly this. Gröningen shares certain similarities with Birmingham. For instance, it is a former industrial town now dominated by a university which includes a major medical school and health complex. Northern Netherlands was rather a wasteland of poor health compared to the rest of the Netherlands as was the Netherlands compared to the rest of Europe until recently. In 2006, the University of Gröningen with multiple partners from local government and the local business community initiated *Healthy Ageing Gröningen* with the precise goal of making Gröningen and northern Netherlands in general the healthiest part of the Netherlands with the ultimate hope of making it the healthiest region of Europe. Note that the focus on aging is because most health challenges affect primarily older citizens, the older population of Gröningen like that of Alabama and the rest of the world is growing rapidly, and also because the Netherlands did not have the problem with high infant mortality that Alabama does.

Gröningen would be delighted to collaborate with us in this effort. I have been in touch with Dr. Folkert Kuipers, who was Dean of the University of Gröningen Medical School during the initiation of the Healthy Ageing Gröningen campaign, and remains on the faculty there. I know Dr. Kuipers through our joint service on the External Advisory Committee of the Mayo Clinic's Kogod Center on Aging. Dr. Kuipers has kindly offered to be our point of contact for any dealings we might like to have with the University/Medical Center. He has been in contact with the mayor of Gröningen, Peter den Oudsten, who is very supportive and with Marieke Zwaving, who oversees all Gröningen community initiatives. I think taking advantage of the knowledge they have gained about initiatives that are successful and ones that were not would be critical in initiating *Healthy Birmingham 2023*.

Importantly, this initiative would involve many or most parts of campus as well as collaborative efforts with city government, schools, local media, community leaders, and local businesses.

The effort itself would highlight UAB's commitment to helping its community and also forge numerous new bonds between gown and town. The details and programs involved in this initiative would be worked out in the first phase of the project in collaboration and consultation with various team members. However, below I highlight some potential initial directions.

Development of a community involvement team. This team would probably be the most important group in implementing the program. It would be focused on strategies for maximizing community involvement in *Healthy Birmingham 2023*. It would of necessity be composed of university, government, media, community, and business leaders. Some members of this committee would need to be familiar with street-level dynamics of individual neighborhoods or at least be familiar with the people who are familiar with street-level dynamics of individual neighborhoods. It would probably be useful to have someone familiar with community involvement in *Healthy Ageing Gröningen* on this team.

Development of research teams focused on local health at UAB. Research programs around health improvement must include approaches from the medical sciences, as well as from public health, psychology, economics, engineering, computer sciences, sociology, social work and other academic disciplines. After all, physical health is intimately tied to psychological health and social wellbeing in a person's life is determined by multiple factors. An easy contribution from the UAB medical community could be free screening, health evaluation, and information fairs associated with key events and locations, for instance churches, in local communities. Involvement of diverse local communities, particularly underserved communities, will be critical to the success of *Healthy Birmingham 2023*, as these communities are where health is the worst. Identification of those key events and locations would be made in consultation and assistance of local community leaders. Another important aspect of Birmingham-focused health research would be enrolling local citizens in large longitudinal health studies that cuts across socioeconomic classes – the Baltimore Longitudinal Study of Aging would be the model with a more diverse spectrum of participants. A study of successful local aging similar to the Newcastle 85+ study.

Development of city-wide health events and initiatives. Highly publicized health-related events such as public walks (through underserved neighborhoods?) or cycling, running, or other athletic competitions could focus the City's attention on its health. An example of such an event was the recent 2018 Healthy Ageing Tour held in Gröningen. It was focused on cycling races from elite internationally-known cyclists but with novice and junior categories as well. The races, however, were only the focal events. It also involved at every finish line several events for children focusing on health/nutrition, etc. and health-related activities sponsored by local business (e.g. inexpensive healthy meal recipes and tastings sponsored by our local celebrity chefs or local supermarkets). Initiatives for health education integrated into the overall curriculum in Birmingham public schools could be another part of this initiative.

There are numerous other approaches and initiatives that could be designed in the initial phase of *Healthy Birmingham 2023*. I have many ideas but rather than enumerate more of those in this preliminary concept paper, I will simply note that to have good ideas you need to have many ideas. Many ideas are best generated by groups of people with diverse expertise focused on specific problems. Coming up with a well-defined series of steps to roll out the program in an organized coherent fashion would be the first phase of *Healthy Birmingham 2023*. This idea has the potential to put Birmingham and UAB on the national map for something very positive.

## Potential team members

Rather than name specific people which I at first considered, I think it better to name areas of expertise from which the best (most knowledgeable, energetic, and importantly most willing) people could be selected.

### At UAB

- Expert(s) in community involvement
- Expert(s) in pediatric and maternal health
- Expert(s) in nutrition
- Expert(s) in geriatrics and social gerontology
- Expert(s) in information technology
- Expert(s) in education strategies
- Expert(s) in health behavior change
- Expert(s) in health economics

### Outside UAB

- Representative(s) from mayor Woodfin's office
- Representative(s) from Birmingham School System
- Representatives(s) from local media (print, radio, television)
- Representative(s) from local businesses interested in improving public health (supermarkets interested in becoming the face of healthy eating in Birmingham, for instance)
- Representative(s) from *Healthy Ageing Gröningen*