

## Hernando, Mississippi

Population	10,580
Development pattern	Low-density city
Population density	936 per square mile
Median household income	\$43,217
Partners involved	State of Mississippi City of Hernando Hernando Public Schools One private landowner

Mississippi has an obesity problem. More than a third of adults in the state are obese, and both the Trust for America's Health and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation named Mississippi the most obese state in the country in 2010.

The state's feeble economy makes it challenging to address these issues. Many communities can barely afford to create walking trails or athletic fields, much less indoor play spaces that can be used year-round. State economist Darrin Webb recently told state lawmakers that Mississippi will probably be struggling financially through at least 2014, due to unemployment resulting from the loss of manufacturing jobs, plus a high state debt.

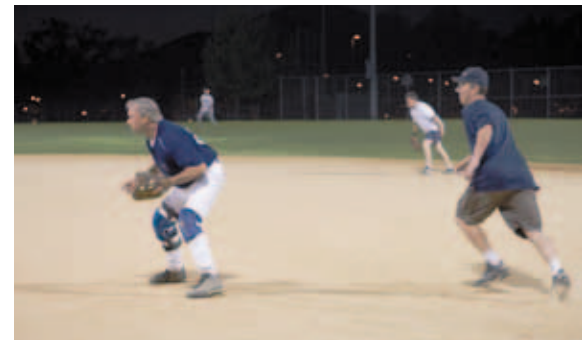
With more than a quarter of the population under 18, the state faces a challenge: promoting physical activity with limited financial resources. Joint use agreements offered one solution.

In 2010, Mississippi gave grants to 20 communities to encourage them to create joint use agreements that would open public schools to the community after school hours and on weekends. The program was funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) through its Communities Putting Prevention to Work initiative.

"Many of our communities don't even have a park or a walking trail or a gym, especially in rural Mississippi," says Shea Lewis, the state health department administrator who runs the joint use agreement program. "Even many of our bigger towns don't have a gym. So communities have been really excited about this initiative, and they've embraced it with open arms."

The timing couldn't have been better for the city of Hernando. The city started a youth basketball program in 2008, and had a handshake agreement with Oak Grove Elementary School to open its gymnasium after school for practice and games. With participation growing by 30 percent every year, the city quickly developed a second agreement with Hernando Middle School.

By 2010, participation was booming, and the city needed to quickly and inexpensively find more gymnasium space.



City parks department staff approached Hernando High School. Principal Freddie Joseph had some reservations about liability and vandalism, and his concerns convinced the city that it had outgrown the handshake agreements. “When we got to three agreements, we really had to make a formal agreement,” says Melissa Zizman, the assistant director of the parks department. “Once everything was spelled out, nobody would have any confusion.”

The principal’s reservations – plus the newly available state grant money – provided a catalyst for creating the city’s first joint use agreements with its public school system.

Under the state’s joint use agreement incentive program, each of Hernando’s three schools received \$3,750 to purchase new gymnasium equipment. Like every other community participating in the state program, Hernando city and school staff had to meet a number of benchmarks:

1. Attend a training in developing joint use agreements, led by the National Policy & Legal Analysis Network to Prevent Childhood Obesity (a program of Public Health Law & Policy)
2. Attend an empowerment meeting
3. Provide regular progress reports
4. Provide the state with notes from the school and city council meetings that involved joint use agreements
5. Write up a success story once the program was in place
6. Provide their legal and operating budgets to the state
7. Clarify how they’d use the grant money to increase accountability and success

Shea Lewis conducts regular site visits to all the communities, both to collect data and offer technical assistance. “Most of my schools are using the money for equipment,” Lewis says. “One built a fitness cluster in their playground. Another built a walking trail at their elementary school.” In Hernando, the grants went toward weight-lifting equipment, padding for gym walls, and basketballs.

Everything has run fairly smoothly, Zizman says. The schools and city agree on a use schedule, with schools having priority. The schools issue keys to the parks department so that the director, the assistant director, the program coordinator, and the basketball league director are responsible for locking and unlocking the gymnasium. The schools have copies of the city’s insurance policy and rules, and if damage happens while the city is using



the gym, the city will repair it if the city is at fault; if not, city staff will let the school know so they can be aware of the issue.

“The formal legal agreement was a little more daunting than we anticipated,” Zizman says. Circulating drafts of the agreement among the city board of aldermen, the city attorney, the board of education, and the board’s attorney took six months from the start until signing. “But we all agreed that even if we didn’t have a formal agreement signed before basketball season started, the schools would let the verbal agreements stand as we worked out the details.”

One sticking point, she says, is that the schools wanted to name which city staff would be responsible. The city preferred using titles in case people changed jobs. The final agreement listed names for the senior parks staff but identified everybody else by titles.

The agreement will need to be renewed after every school year. The short-term approach works best for Hernando because the community isn’t sure how big its programs will be from year to year.

The city’s youth basketball program (ages 8–17) was the first to benefit. A men’s basketball league started using the gyms in spring 2012. Other sports – both youth and adult leagues – can use the gymnasiums in future years if they need the space.

The city/school agreements weren’t Hernando’s first experience with formal use agreements. Since 2009, the city has had a formal agreement with a private landowner in the city. He has a field that is currently for sale but goes unused otherwise, and the city needed space for its fall soccer league. The legal document in place asserts that the city can use the field until it is sold. The parks department maintains the grounds and keeps it up to the owner’s standards. The city must notify the owner of its usage schedule, but this can be done verbally. The owner is indemnified while the city uses the property but is responsible for what happens outside of the programs. The city’s soccer program has increased by 50 people each year since the agreement was put in place.

Unlike many communities, which build their joint use agreements after rounds of public input, Hernando didn’t publicize the new agreements with the city’s schools. “Most people think it’s just the schools being friendly and letting us use their gym,” Zizman says. “But without the joint use agreements, we wouldn’t have the league.”

During the process, the schools asked what they would get out of the agreements. At first, the schools thought they would be facing a greater hassle with maintenance and safety issues, getting little in return. The city reminded the schools that the parks department waives fees to the city’s parks and pavilions for school field trips.

And Zizman maintains that the schools benefit in terms of public relations. “A lot of taxpayers say, ‘Why can’t my kids use the gym after hours?’ From a public relations perspective, the joint use agreements enable 300 kids and their parents to benefit from a school that would otherwise be locked.”