The Colorado Health Foundation™



Day Three on the Ground in Colorado Mountain Towns

#HealthiestCO Statewide Listening Tour

We encountered a small family of black bears on Tuesday night in downtown **Steamboat Springs**. Two cubs and their mother ran down the sidewalk as we began to drive away after dinner. In a state of wonderment, we halted the car and watched as the cubs climbed up a tree. Their mother kept a close eye on them and us. We were truly in awe: yes, we were technically in the mountains but what exactly were these wild creatures doing in such a civilized setting? Had they too just gotten done dining in town? Just as we began to speculate, the three bears sprinted off into the night.

Just like mother bear and her cubs, we've observed that families are doing what they know best all over Colorado's mountain communities. Families are faced with impossible decisions one day after another. Do I send my child to school sick or do I stay home and miss out on a day's worth of pay? Its decisions like these that raise the important question we must ask ourselves and those in all of our tour sessions is: how do we as a community shine a light on those families?

Today we departed Steamboat early and traveled to the small town of **Walden**, also known as the moose viewing capital of the state, for a site visit and intimate conversation with folks from the senior, medical and education sectors at the North Park Medical Clinic.

Karen described the clinic as a "gem," noting that even in this tiny place, they are able to offer primary and mental health care. Yet, there is no pharmacy. Residents must drive 60 miles in either direction for prescriptions and during the winter months, being snowbound means you risk your life on the road or must wait 24 to

48 hours for a mail prescription. For all people, especially families with children or chronically ill adults, access to medicine is a necessity.

But, again, the beauty of Walden drives residents to stay or keep second homes on sprawling ranches. Residents will drive up to four hours to watch their kids play sports, and they happily bake cookies for out-of-towners driving through during the Colorado Grand, a classic car charity event.

We traveled onto Snow Mountain Ranch at the YMCA of the Rockies outside **Granby** for our final tour session. After an impromptu walking tour – where we spied primary care and mental health offices, a dentist and Planned Parenthood – we settled in for another lively chat with residents. Our key takeaways double as we witness clear trends across the many resort communities we've had the opportunity to visit in the last couple days:

- Resort communities are second home communities. Residents tend to view this as a double-edged sword when it comes to taxes and how it skews census and health data.
- Residents have abundant access to recreation and the economies are growing or balanced due to tourism.
- Mental health – particularly suicide rates – is a tremendous issue and has been highlighted in every meeting we've had to date. As mentioned in yesterday's recap, "kids are carrying around adult problems." Grand county residents indicate there aren't enough beds or counselors in the schools or for families. Alcohol and substance abuse are chronic.
- Access to care has been noted as a substantial concern in Colorado's mountain communities. Yet, even though there isn't a local pediatrician in Grand County, folks at our meeting shared that the primary care services serve the people well.
- Seniors have home health care, which isn't consistent across every town and county we've been to.

- High rates of free and reduced lunch point to poverty-driven challenges we're hearing about everywhere: parents working two to three jobs, no affordable child care, long work commutes and little time to be spent with children. Schools are closed on Friday. One woman noted, "Kids come to school sick all the time. We have kids laying down in the nurse's office for three hours because their parents can't leave work."

As we wrap up the Mountain region tour and prepare for the next in the Northern and Northeast regions of the state, we return back to our own community with new ideas and thoughts.

We see resiliency, passion and people who care for their neighbors. We see that the only sustainable engine in the community *is* the community.

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Blog

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