The Colorado Health Foundation™



Day One on the Ground in Northeastern Colorado

#HealthiestCO Statewide Listening Tour

October weather in Colorado is always unpredictable. This morning, however, we were greeted by the promise of warmer temps on third leg of the #HealthiestCO listening tour. Our plan is to make 13 stops over the next three days in rural communities scattered across the vast Northeastern Colorado plains. We hit the road early.

Our first stop was in **Yuma** for a site visit at the local 12-bed hospital. The facility boasts Life Trails Park, a beautiful outdoor green space with robust fitness equipment dedicated to the entire community. While local residents shared that the new park is underutilized, it's also a community symbol of the will to build places that promote healthy living.

Our next stop, Morris Elementary School features a state-of-the-art playground that succeeds and making adults wish they were kids again. On any given day, the playground houses the laughter of more than 300 school-aged children… And based on the level of activity and joy we witnessed, this is an asset of great significance to the Yuma community.

We ventured on to **Wray** for our first tour session and dove deep into the community's strengths and challenges. Guests commented on how close-knit the community is, touting great partnerships between individuals and businesses. One guest even stated it's not uncommon for the community to raise upward of $35,000 in one night for a fellow neighbor in crisis. Foundation president and CEO Karen's comment that Yuma County is, "number one in the state for quality of life," was met by nodding heads. Why? Open spaces, clean air and good water.

But, there are also many barriers, such as one major theme around access to and affordability of healthy foods. Attendees discussed the high cost of nutritious foods, widespread miseducation on what healthy food is and dire health outcomes resulting from these harsh realities. Workforce issues and the impact on child care and senior care services were raised. Simply put, there is a shortage of funding and certified caregivers to provide the services required. Despite the many barriers to health, there is resounding hope. “Part of the picture may be grim but we have the potential to be the healthiest county in the state,” said one attendee.

In **Sterling**, a lively crowd expressed desire for better infrastructure that promotes healthy and active living – more accessible walking/biking trails and better recreational resources such as club activities. Other barriers to health include gaps in the mental health system such as limited provider choice and stigma, inability to recruit and retain health care providers and lack of oral health providers. While Medicaid is accepted at a majority of primary care facilities, there are not enough physicians to care for the entire population. Many residents travel far distances just to access the care they need.

Yet, as we listened, we saw an audience full of individuals, neighbors and a community willing to band together in the name of health. We saw impassioned people who care deeply for the young and older people in their lives, as well as the indigent and immigrant populations. It is the heart and the energy we felt in the room that is the community’s greatest asset.

We know that data never tells the whole story and we acknowledge that we have so much more to learn. The conversations we’ve initiated thus far are just the beginning – the first of many chapters to come on the real health stories of Coloradans and the beloved communities they call home.

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Blog

POST DATE

Oct 26, 2015