



Day Three on the Ground in Northern Colorado

#HealthiestCO Statewide Listening Tour

While the mountain communities we visited two weeks ago ready for ski season opening day, we wrapped up our third leg of our #HealthiestCO regional tour by visiting nine counties across the Northern and Northeast regions of Colorado.

We've covered a lot of ground, having toured 25 of 64 Colorado counties.

President and CEO Karen McNeil-Miller has shifted from sharing how long she's been on staff to the number of counties we've visited, signaling a feeling of progress in stitching together the diverse quilt that depicts the celebrations and challenges of Colorado's health story. We still have a long ways to go, but here is what we learned on a sunny and bright day in Northern Colorado:

In **Fort Collins**, we were greeted at Gardens on Spring Creek by the warmth of the morning sun and welcomed by the people of Larimer County. It is this setting in which we were exposed to the state of mental health in the region. Stories of struggle and stigma echoed throughout the room. As we listened, we realized the stark truth – that just because you can't see it, doesn't mean it doesn't exist.

And in Fort Collins, the community has begun to acknowledge the grave realities of mental health issues. Limited availability of preventive and crisis services strikes a mark, but access is the simple yet complicated problem keeping many from managing mental health issues. Attendees painted a picture of suicide, sex workers, substance abuse and stigma that keeps individuals suffering in silence and behind closed doors.

Yet, we were also reminded of the community's strengths: a collaborative spirit, progress in early childhood social and emotional development, advanced school wellness programs and elected officials with health matters in mind.

We traveled next across town to the Sister Mary Alice Murphy Center for Hope, where we were educated on how the region's homeless or near homeless population are connected with vital resources. The Murphy Center acts as a network of support, connecting the homeless with local entities such as the two homeless shelters, a workforce agency and health care providers. It is equipped with laundry and mail services, lockers to store prized possessions, a business center and an area designated for families and children.

Our day's journey didn't end there. We made our way south to **Erie** for a site visit at Red Hawk Elementary School, where we saw firsthand what innovative physical education looks like in the school setting. Students at Red Hawk are provided anywhere between 85 to 105 minutes of exercise each day, including in-class and school-wide physical activity. The results? Happy and healthy students who achieve better academic performance. (A few of us fought the urge to dance along in the second grade classroom.)

Our final visit for the day was in **Longmont**. Natural and built environment were touted as assets, along with low cost gyms, adequate recreation centers and a culture centered on health. We learned that wellness and academic performance are strong in the school system and it's linked to student success. For those experiencing food insecurity, a backpack program provides school-aged children and their families with food access on the weekends.

As for Longmont's challenges, we heard again that mental health is an issue. We learned about "the death of informal physical activity" or a culture of competition where impromptu exercise is not present. Sports activities, quite simple, come attached with high price tags that many can't afford.

On this week's listening tour, we were captivated by Colorado's countryside – a hidden treasure amongst a state known for its endless beauty – and are grateful for the raw honesty of its people. While we have much to learn, the wisdoms we've

gained from this regional tour are countless and we look forward to the many health lessons to come.

- Boulder County has a higher poverty rate than one would expect, particularly for children.
- There is a strong disconnect between health care services and underserved populations in need.
- Though there may be a strong safety net, it is not strong enough. Nederland youth, for example, have no primary care services available and struggle to get school sports physicals necessary for participation.

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