



Day Two on the Ground in Southern Colorado

#HealthiestCO Statewide Listening Tour

While much of Colorado woke up to snow on the ground, and our colleagues in the office in Denver took advantage of a snow day, we found ourselves in a pocket of clear weather in **Cañon City** as we continued the Southern region #HealthiestCO tour.

Our first session of the day in Fremont County was attended by a wonderfully diverse group of community members including representatives from education, government, faith-based organizations, public health and health care including mental health. The attendees shared many assets to health found in the community, but what stood out and what they were most proud of is their ability to work together. From the 40-year-old Early Childhood Collaborative to the one-year-old Housing Collaborative, this community is committed to coming together for lasting change. But are also aware they have big problems to solve. In addition to a lack of available and affordable housing, community members are struggling with transportation issues in their large, rural county, thus causing a lack of access to care despite a strong health care system. A high rate of unemployment and suicide, along with increasing crime and substance abuse rates were also identified as challenges. And when it comes to physical activity, Fremont County is well known for its outstanding year-round access to outdoor activities. However, it is difficult to find safe paths and good sidewalks without driving to a trail.

After showing a few Cañon City session attendees, who were jealous of the snow “up North,” pictures of our dogs playing in a foot of snow, we were back on the (dry, sunny) road to **Pueblo**. There we started with a quick visit with the Pueblo Triple Aim Corporation who shared their vision of making Pueblo the healthiest county in the state as well as the challenge – Pueblo is currently in the bottom five

counties in all Colorado county health rankings. The presentation led to a robust, if geeky, discussion about how data can be used to model possible intervention outcomes and help refine areas of focus. Again we heard about how important collaborative relationships across various sectors are to increasing health. We also heard that it's important to remember that change takes patience.

Karen always takes time to remind tour session attendees that everyone is in the business of health and that health doesn't just happen in the doctor's office. We were excited for our next stop, a lunch with the Pueblo Chamber of Commerce, to see for ourselves how health happens there. The Chamber provided a wonderful healthy meal, lively conversation and a take-home jar of Pueblo Green Chile salsa. We know that economics impacts health, but here we learned more about how that can become a vicious cycle, with some health issues impacting the economy as well. Members shared how substance abuse issues in these communities make it hard for businesses to find a drug-free work force leading to difficulty attracting large employers to the area. The Chamber also shared that the region struggles to retain health care professionals and are working to train a workforce locally to increase retention, but have trouble finding instructors to teach the classes despite a strong post-secondary educational system in Pueblo. A former city council member did remind us that there are assets to health in the area – such as access to outdoor spaces for physical activity and healthy local foods – and that it is a great place to live for many. Did you know that the area near Lake Pueblo has over 70 miles of mountain biking trails?

Our last session of the day was just down the road at Pueblo Community College and was our biggest group of this tour. We again had representation from a wide range of sectors especially higher education and mental health. The assets that stood out here, in addition to a collaborative spirit, are a strong health care system that includes hospitals, community health centers, mental health and specialty care, as well as a strong tradition of civic pride. Attendees cited an engaged

community, many of whom have a long lasting generational commitment to the region. Community members in the room lamented that despite having strong health care systems they struggle with how to help residents understand how to utilize those services and how to create a culture of preventive care rather than interventional care. Many of the challenges were the same as we've seen across this region (and the state) – substance abuse and mental health issues – and some, like poverty are the worst we've seen. But, Karen reminded us that regardless of the similarity of the challenges in different areas, what she's listening for are the nuances – the slight differences in the cause (and solution) we can identify in each community. One member of the community took this to heart and reminded the people in the room that, just as the Foundation is asking communities to share their nuanced knowledge, they should also be asking their communities – neighborhood by neighborhood.

A ray of sunshine found us in the Southern region today while our loved ones in various parts of the state were buried in snow. It was here we found another ray of sunshine – the hope that comes from discovering a group of people committed to working together to improve the health of their community.

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