The Colorado Health Foundation™



Day One on the Ground in Southwest Colorado

#HealthiestCO Statewide Listening Tour

This week's #HealthiestCO listening tour combines two vast regions of the state, including counties across the Southwest portion of Colorado and the San Luis Valley. We kicked off day one of this three-day leg with two tour sessions and two site visits, covering 150 miles between Cortez, Dove Creek and Durango.

Our first stop was a site visit to the **Piñon Project Family Resource Center**, which provides services to more than 3,000 families in Southwest Colorado every year. We could sense the passion from the staff as they shared an approach to strengthening families by empowering people. They also treat the whole person with wrap-around services; for example, a patient may come in to be treated for the flu, but get connected to financial resources that help keep the lights on at home.

Next stop was **Cortez** where 25 Montezuma County residents joined Karen for a listening tour session. The residents discussed their many community assets including: access to parks and outdoor recreation, agriculture, Axis Health Center that offers integrated medical and behavioral health, strong momentum from 164 nonprofits in the county, collaboration among health and human services, a tribal health center to serve Native Americans and the diversity of the community.

We also learned about high housing prices, lack of healthy food access and a growing elderly population that leads to isolation and depression that are creating barriers to health. Health literacy challenges, for example, not understanding how to use Medicare, were also discussed. Residents shared how the county's economic situation is driving difficulties in recruiting teachers and health care providers. One participant noted that the community's self-image is a challenge —

“we persist with being okay with mediocrity” — and remarked that residents need to demonstrate more care in the community.

The afternoon found us in Dove Creek for a meeting with local **Dolores County** leadership. We learned that the 2,000 county residents have basic health services available and a 20 percent senior population. Younger residents are leaving to pursue better jobs and public transportation is nonexistent. But again, the residents shared enthusiasm for a positive future.

Later, in Mancos, we enjoyed some fresh air and nice weather while touring the **Montezuma School to Farm Project** at the **Cortez Middle School Garden Production Area**. The program was awarded the Colorado Association of Conservation District's Educational Program of the Year, and we can see why. Eleven staff work across three school districts in the area to provide fresh food to students. At the Cortez Middle School Production Area, students harvested 3000 pounds of food this year in the two-plus acres that include 75 fruit trees, beds with potatoes, squash, pumpkins, lemon cucumbers, corn, raspberries, blackberries and other fruits and veggies. The program also includes several creative real-life experiences such as third grade restaurant day, where kids are responsible for food production, cooking, serving and collecting money for the meal.

After a drive back to **Durango**, we settled into the final tour session of the day at a beautiful old theater in the Strater Hotel. One of the best attended tour sessions to date, **La Plata** and **San Juan County** residents shared freely about the assets that are helping to drive better health, including:

- The number of people who care about health in the community;
- Availability of hiking and biking trails
- Attractive outdoor conditions and weather that attracts people to reside there;
- A vibrant local food movement;

- Strong medical care services, with a clinical setting that works to collaborate, communicate and not duplicate other services;
- Active volunteers, strong family and community values and civic engagement;
- A robust nonprofit community with 300 registered nonprofits; and
- Arts, music, festivals.

However, a bulk of the conversation was spent discussing barriers and challenges. The primary themes — poverty, income disparity and health inequity — underscore the community's overarching challenges for achieving health. The session attendees identified other challenges, including:

- Housing costs
- Oral health care for Medicaid patients;
- Substance abuse and addiction issues, which is driving high suicide rates and other behavioral health issues;
- Access to rural transportation services;
- Lack of health care providers;
- And finally, a struggle with the community's identity as a "party town."

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Blog

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