



# Day Two on the Ground in Southeast Colorado

#HealthiestCO Statewide Listening Tour

We awoke in **La Junta** to find a light dusting of snow, below freezing temperatures and lots of wind. Yet the Foundation crew was determined, we have too much to learn to let the wintry weather deter us. Today, we headed to more of the unique rural communities that makeup Southeast Colorado.

We began our day playing at **Swink Park** where we huddled together in the morning cold as locals told the tale of the park's evolution. The land was designated for park use more than 50 years ago but wasn't developed until 2012. It's equipped with robust circuit stations and playground equipment suited for a wide range of kids. The fields are used by the town's sports teams and the gazebo is used frequently by the community for birthday celebrations and more.

In **Las Animas** – “the city of souls” – community members shared with us the stories beyond the health data. We learned about the plight of poverty and its impact on the health of individuals, families and the community. Attendees unpacked the challenges that a 33 percent poverty rate presents to health, telling stories of children who go hungry and lack sleep. Behavioral health weighs heavy on the youth and substance abuse is a prevalent threat for teen, young adult and adult populations. Yet, though Las Animas is hit hard with these issues, they have many assets. Residents spoke of a warm and welcoming community. One that “gets it” when it comes to healthy living and what that entails: healthy snacks and lunches at schools, opportunities for physical activity and outdoor recreation and increased educational opportunities. Residents of Bent County have many success stories within their health system. Community members expressed their collaborative nature will continue to move critical health programs forward in a positive direction.

Next, we headed to **Lamar** for our second site visit of the day to learn about the many projects of the [Healthy Places Lamar](#). We braved the blustery winds and trekked across town to see two projects. The Pocket Park, boasting beautiful street art, is a small, centralized outdoor area that once complete will be used for community events such as live music in downtown Lamar. Next, we toured Northside Park – an outdoor space blending the aesthetics of bright colors with the promotion of physical activity. The park was built by more than 300 local volunteers and is touted as a symbol of community pride.

Santa graced us with his presence during the next tour session at the Lamar Community Building. Though we did not anticipate a celebrity guest appearance, we were elated upon his arrival and his affection for the Lamar community. This set the stage for spirited conversation among attendees. For the first time on the listening tour, we heard about cross-cultural health care assets. Prowers Medical Center has several medical interpreters on staff and a program offering medical interpretation certifications. This holds significant value to a region with a higher Spanish speaking population than the state average. Attendees spoke of strong communication, collaboration and networking among community members who value the places they call home and the people they call neighbors. “We are a community that cares, dreams, helps, rolls up our sleeves and makes things happen.”

They spoke of health challenges too. There was a consensus around the room that “buy-in” – whether that be from leadership, parents or individuals is key. Community members touched on a high teen pregnancy rate, economic development issues, substance abuse and the foundation on which these obstacles are manifested. One attendee stated that residents are living day-to-day on borrowed time and that without reprieve, the issues faced will continue to be a pebble in the pond of poor health outcomes.

Our final stop in the Southeast region was in **Wiley** at the local, and only, K-12 school. We could feel the energy of the students as we walked the hallways, popping our heads into the gymnasium to see a room full of lively kids. The schoolyard has been transformed to a state-of-the-art playscape, furnished with a safe but traditional swing set, climbing equipment, a merry-go-round and more. The principal and a member of the wellness team were proud to tell us about their staff and student wellness programs and their commitment to fresh foods and scratch cooking. School meals are made predominately from scratch cooking and approximately 95 percent of the elementary students and 85 percent of middle and high schoolers each lunch in the cafeteria.

The insights gained during the Statewide Listening Tour are priceless and the conversations we've started are just the beginning of something much bigger. We understand that the data only tells a small part of the health story and we look forward to learning more from you. For now, we wish you a happy and healthy holiday season.

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