The Colorado Health Foundation™



On the Ground in the Eastern Plains

#HealthiestCO Statewide Listening Tour

This week marks a significant milestone for the #HealthiestCO Statewide Listening Tour. In October, we set out to listen to community members from each county across the state. Today, we've officially cruised 63 of 64 Colorado counties, with only Denver left to go.

For our final road tour in the Eastern Plains, we traveled the prairielands, crossed paths with tumbleweeds and stretched our sights on the big sky and wide open spaces. More importantly, we met with some very important and passionate community members from Elbert, Lincoln, Kit Carson and Cheyenne counties.

Our first stop at **Kiowa** Town Hall included a conversation that was rich with insights on community assets and challenges. Residents spoke of bountiful outdoor activities but lack of indoor recreational facilities, bike lanes and safe routes. Largely known for its "country flair" – or farmland – this region has access to healthy and affordable produce, but minimalist grocery stores and, surprisingly, no local farmers markets. They share interest for community gardens, but face challenges in sustaining them. Most prominent of all challenges expressed, however, was the need for a local "health hub" – one that can provide individuals, across the lifespan, with access to indoor exercise equipment, fitness classes, educational resources and more.

We took an impromptu activity break on the way to our next stop at Fawn Valley Park. Though some might argue we got lost, the slight detour offered us the opportunity to enjoy the fresh air locals talked about. The park itself boasted robust fitness equipment – ranging from basic to advanced skill levels – and a state-of-the-art playground. Equipment included everything from lower-body,

upper-body and core strengthening to stretching and yoga.

At our next stop in **Limon**, we learned about similar health challenges as those faced in Kiowa. Chief among these issues was the desire for an indoor recreational center. Residents shared concern with the lack of indoor exercise opportunities and the benefits of having this resource available. Unique to this region, two local hotels do open their pool to public use. We also heard about the region's health system and the need to strengthen access to preventative, specialty and mental health services. We learned about the Fast Track System – a resource that allows residents access to scheduled urgent care without the high costs of being treated at an emergency department. And though there is a strong network of quality health care professionals, recruitment and retention for the rolling plains is a widespread issue.

We journeyed on to **Burlington**, or as some might say "almost Kansas," to find a tremendous community asset. At Prairie Family Center, community is family and resources are extensive. Individuals, children, parents and families have access to vital tools that will help them thrive. Some programs offered at the Prairie Family center include parenting, cooking and fitness courses. As well, it serves as an assistance site for individuals and families in need of health insurance coverage; collects donations for a monthly food bank; and owns a thrift store located across the street.

On Tuesday morning, we made our way to **Cheyenne Wells** and toured Keefe Memorial Hospital. This rural, acute care hospital is one of the smallest in Colorado and the nation, with only 25 beds and 11 available. The staff, from administrators to frontline workers, are dedicated to treating patients like family and improving community health. At this site, we also met with the county public health director, who discussed some of the local public health issues. Top concerns include substance abuse, more specifically underage drinking, and tobacco use.

With only Denver County left to visit, the #HealthiestCO road is largely behind us… but there is much work ahead. We'd like to extend our gratitude to Colorado communities – rural, frontier and urban – who hosted and shared your health stories. We appreciate you and the work you do to make Colorado a healthier place to live, work and play.

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POST DATE

Feb 23, 2016