The Colorado Health Foundation™

# On the Ground in Jefferson County

#HealthiestCO Statewide Listening Tour

A full house of community members joined us for our visit to Golden at the American Mountaineering Association. Fittingly, next to the beautiful red rocks of the Front Range, **Jefferson County** residents shared their pride in their community's unparalleled open spaces, parks and recreational opportunities. With a spirit of collaboration guiding the discussion, community members also shared the significant barriers to health in their community, most of which are related to poverty and behavioral health issues.

Initial comments from the group reflected a truly collaborative approach amongst the people in the room, who mentioned partnerships between public health, human services and parks and recreation. Unique to Jefferson County, the Child and Youth Leadership Commission is a partnership of 22 family-serving agencies and local jurisdictions working to increase the health and well-being of children, youth, and families. Organizations involved include social services, health, law enforcement and nonprofits.

Residents also called out community assets: access to high-quality hospitals and primary care, an excellent school system, school wellness coalitions and good mental health infrastructure. Transportation via the Light Rail system and easy access to the Denver metro area were touted as essential to the community's success.

However, the close proximity to Denver includes its own set of challenges: Jefferson County's cities are seen as "bedroom communities" and families who move to the area often face affordable housing shortages and must travel to Denver for work. Participants mentioned that many families are doubling up or couch-surfing, leading to instability and higher stress levels at home. Residents also said, carefully, that there is a lack of consensus in the county about what they want their community to look like and an inability to openly communicate about what they want for their community as a whole.

As in many of our Statewide Listening Tour sessions, the subjects of poverty, substance abuse and mental and behavioral health were expressed as significant barriers to health. Although there is a good provider network of mental and behavioral health centers, the stigma around these issues remains strong. Access to mental health services for non "at-risk" populations, particularly teens, is limited. Child psychiatrists and psychologists are difficult to find, while school counselors are ill-equipped to deal with substance abuse issues. Residents are aware that drug abuse is a growing concern, and the Department of Health recently started a needle exchange program due to the escalating problem.

The story in Jefferson County is similar to those we've heard throughout neighboring counties in the Denver region. Yet, the group in Golden made one thing very clear: they are seeking meaningful engagement between consumers and the community, increased connections between providers, more thoughtful conversations about the barriers they are facing, and continued collaboration.

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