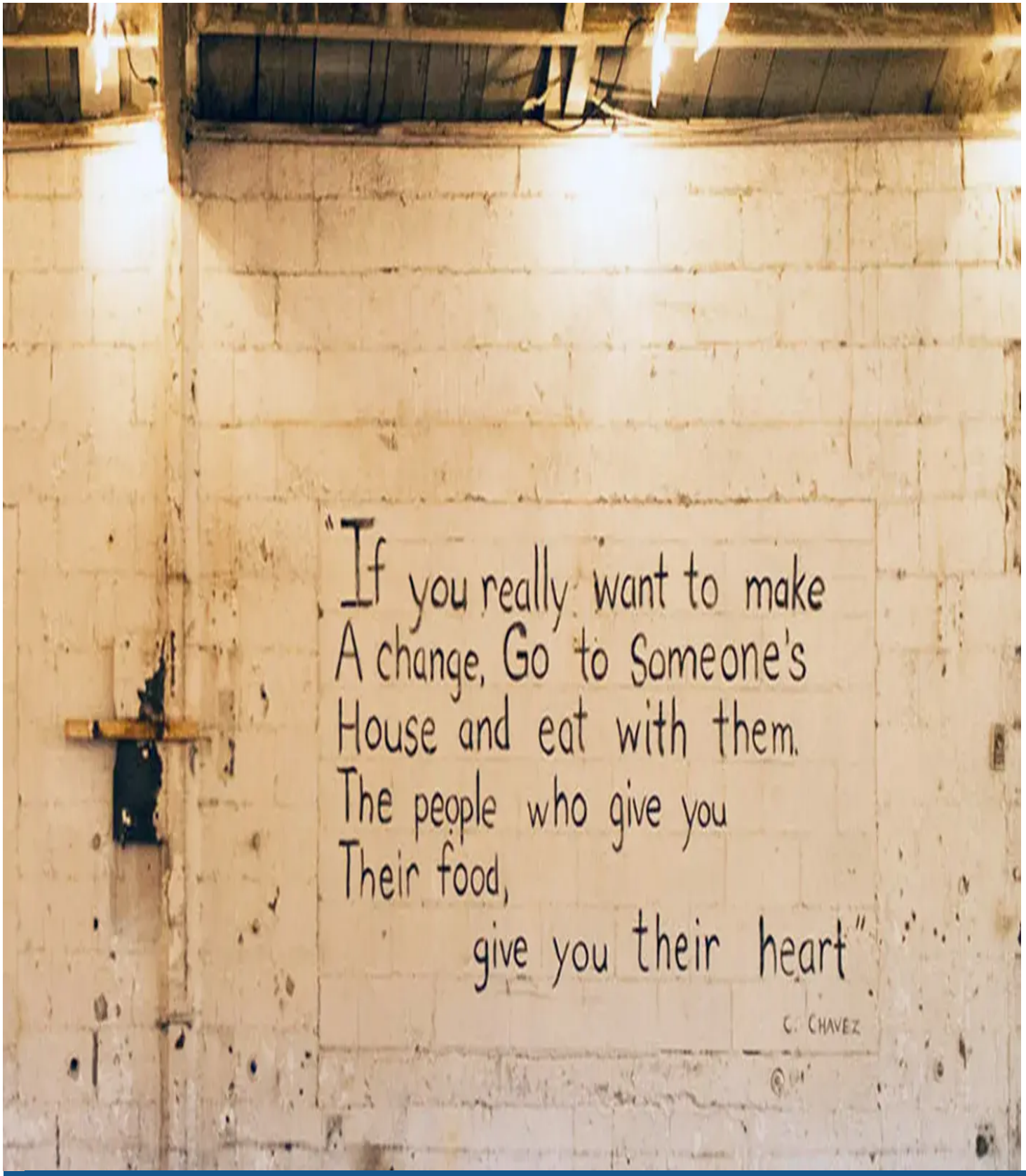
The Colorado Health Foundation™



A Place at the (kitchen) Table

In picturing a food desert, you likely don't imagine a high-traffic urban area with a large population. Yet, they do exist, even right here in Denver.

A couple of months ago, I attended an event at the Westwood Food Cooperative, the first co-op grocery store in Denver's Westwood neighborhood – an urban food desert.

Three Colorado communities, including Westwood, were recognized during the event for their efforts to improve the health of their residents. It was a moment for me and others to be present in Westwood, to see the nitty gritty of how the community operates and to witness the impact of our funding on their community-wide commitment.

We were lucky enough that evening to celebrate their success in organizing and launching a community-owned grocery store, among other things. We gathered alongside community members and their children, local artists and musicians inside a garage that doubles as a local weekend market. The space was unexpectedly beautiful: pale-lit string lights draped across the high ceilings; the walls were drenched in color; live music and conversation filled the room; the soft ambience had that "right at home" feel to it. It was in this moment – sharing a meal and celebrating healthy living – that I was struck by a powerful message etched on the garage wall:

"If you really want to make a change, go to someone's house and eat with them. The people who give you their food, give you their heart."

To me, that message speaks to trust. In philanthropy, we are on a forever quest to achieve understanding, clarity and trust with our partners and grantees. But, it's equally important that we deeply understand what a community needs to be

healthy. We haven't always been poised and organized for deep community engagement, but that's the direction we are headed now.

A few years ago, when I was a program officer at the Kate B. Reynolds Trust in North Carolina, I participated in a panel about community engagement. We discussed a simple metaphor that is not as simple to execute.

> This is a fundamental shift in who we are, how we show up, who we talk to and who we pay attention to. The shift happens far beyond philanthropy. This is not just a grantmaking strategy. It's about us changing our DNA, changing our fingerprints.
>
> – Karen McNeil-Miller, president and CEO, on new approach to community engagement

It starts with viewing the community as a home. Program officers have a responsibility to develop and build understanding, trust and relationships within that home. We might start in the yard or driveway, maybe converse over the weather or chat about life. But, our desire is always to be invited inside. It might start in the formal living room. We begin to recognize others who live there, to wonder and inquire about their daily lives. The ultimate final stop, however, is the kitchen. And, if we're lucky, we find ourselves with a place at the table.

At the Colorado Health Foundation, we view community engagement as both a process and an outcome. It involves working at all levels of community, from grass top leaders to systems to residents. To us, each community is a home, with

its own unique challenges, stories and people.

Historically, as a grantmaker, we've been familiar with communities across the state. But we are ready to go beyond this familiarity, taking on a more intentional approach that enables us to be more deeply aware of and engaged in the towns and cities – urban, rural and frontier – that comprise Colorado.

To do this, we have adopted new and refined focus areas and set new expectations for how staff work. One example is how we've evolved the program officer role to more deeply reinforce organizational mission and priorities through a clear model of community engagement practices.

By engaging differently with communities, we increase our ability to understand their strengths and challenges, which better positions us to respond to factors that impact the health and health equity of Colorado residents and communities. Moving forward, for example, program staff will intentionally serve as ambassadors – the face, voice, ears, arms and feet – of the Foundation, representing our agenda and interests on the ground, while listening to and learning from community members to cultivate positive change based on need.

As our program officers begin to live and breathe their evolved roles, the Foundation, too, continues to grow and iterate. We have much to learn and understand, and plan to share that with you.

Over the next year, we will release a series of blog posts authored by our staff that documents our experience with this new approach to community engagement. We invite your feedback and thoughts throughout – perhaps even over a bite to eat.

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Blog

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