The Colorado Health Foundation™



Dahlia Campus: A Healthy Home for the Whole Neighborhood

You can fit a whole neighborhood into a good home.

The kitchen is where the community gets fed. The study is where mom and dad get business done and keep the house going. The playroom is where the kids come to learn and grow. The garden nurtures everyone with health. And the porch is where people gather to talk about their triumphs and tragedies.

The Mental Health Center of Denver's Dahlia Campus for Health and Well-Being was designed from the first brick to be a home that contained an entire neighborhood. Conceived and built with grant support from the Foundation and many other partners, Dahlia Campus combines a preschool, one-acre farm, dental care, aquaponics greenhouse, community kitchen, meeting space, and yes, mental health services, all at one historic location.



Photo courtesy of Sewall Child Development Center

And the best the community says about it is the best you could hope for at any home: "It's welcoming, inside and out," said Jocelyn Miller, who uses the

community space to teach a Zumba class and parenting workshops.

Dahlia Campus is re-consecrating a revered site. Decades ago it housed one of the largest African-American owned business and shopping centers west of the Mississippi, until ravaged by fire and neglect. Schemes came and went over subsequent decades, and the community grew skeptical anything good would ever happen there.

The Mental Health Center of Denver knew that pronouncing “We’re giving you mental health offices” would not necessarily be met with community excitement. Denver’s large nonprofit mental and behavioral health provider, the Mental Health Center of Denver, saw great demand from northeast Denver ZIP codes but had no offices there. As in many places, residents felt the stigma of seeking help with behavioral health.

So Vice President Lydia Prado and others canvassed the neighborhood listening to what was needed. Child care and education, for one. Green space. Meeting rooms and kitchens for everything from classes to business expos to senior dance class.

Planners heard tooth decay was the number one reason local kids missed school, said Taliah Abdullah, Dahlia Campus site coordinator. Dental space was added, and Kids in Need of Dentistry partnered to run it. The area is a healthy-food desert, so partners came on to raise fish through indoor aquaponics and develop community gardens that would sell surplus produce to the neighborhood at an on-site stand.

Dahlia Campus’ setup – from easy parking to sensible meeting spaces and reasonable rental prices – is a key resource for community connections, said Phaedra High, who used the space for a natural hair and skin care expo. More than three dozen vendors mingled with more than 400 residents for the event.

“I really believe Dahlia is an awesome state-of-the-art community center,” High said. “Everything is in one place.”

Though not front-and-center, the “official” mental health component is robust. Clinicians have meeting spaces for individuals and families, and others rotate through local schools in supporting roles. A therapy garden tended by clients looks out on senior apartments across the street, and the seniors help out by watering the gardens during warm weather.

Abdullah is confident all rooms of this new community “home” will soon be equally busy. One reason for her optimism? The community space at Dahlia Campus is already booked through all of 2017.

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