The Colorado Health Foundation™



Proud of Rural Health

Rural communities run on pride and social cohesion. There are many reasons why rural communities are great places to live: they are often home to resilient and committed residents who provide innovative and creative solutions to the challenges they face. However, they are also places with some of the most challenging access to care issues. Good access to care is the lifeline we all need, and when it’s not accessible or affordable, it becomes hazardous to our health.

I grew up in rural North Carolina. When we needed to go to a doctor, my parents couldn’t necessarily get off work to take us. And to top it off, there were only a couple of doctors in the county, and only one — Dr. Lane — took patients who were black.

Like so many rural areas, the people who lived and worked in my hometown rallied and relied on each other. Dr. Lane would see us in his home in the evenings and on weekends. People in my community like Dr. Lane saw the inequity and challenges of people trying to make a good living. He and others adjusted to fit their neighbors' lives instead of the other way around. Looking back, I see how unbelievably lucky we were.

I worry that the same issue of access to care is still today such a prevalent and serious barrier to health, particularly in Colorado. According to the Colorado Health Report Card Data Spotlight, we as a state are more than 70 percent rural in geography. Generally, in rural areas, residents face a lack of available providers of all types, including physicians, nurses, pharmacists, etc. While some rural communities may have a local clinician or two, there often are not enough providers to serve the physical, behavioral and oral health needs of the entire area.

The bottom line is that the state of Colorado's health won't improve unless rural communities are healthy. We have to pay attention to our rural communities and how rural residents are able to receive care. I am encouraged that a major theme of bipartisan discussion in the 2017 state legislative session was about rural communities and the sustainability of the core institutions and infrastructure they need to thrive. Both sides of the aisle considered the unique experiences of rural Coloradans and focused on important questions of how we can do better as a state in supporting our rural communities and the families who live there.

As a Colorado resident now, my desire is to walk into any rural or frontier Colorado town and hear residents exude pride about being a healthy community. Not only are lawmakers acting, but we at the Foundation are committed to boosting rural health in every corner of the state. We have to bring the resources and a determination to address inequities between urban and rural Colorado. We are determined to help communities with a population of 2,000 just as we do communities of 200,000.

The Foundation is working toward contributing our resources — along with our insights and a listening ear to rural Colorado. We will work with communities using their expertise to strengthen the health of Coloradans. All Colorado communities should be known for — and have pride for — improving health and giving every resident the opportunity to live their healthiest lives.

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