The Colorado Health Foundation™



A Catalyst for Change in Colorado Communities

Yellowstone – the world's first national park – is nestled atop an active volcanic hot spot. Covering nearly 3,500 square miles, the park's lively landscape hosts more than 10,000 hydrothermal features, 500 active geysers and nearly 300 waterfalls. Its rivers, forests and canyons are home to hundreds of animal species. And today, it's home to the northern Rocky Mountain wolf.

A short video, "How Wolves Change Rivers," describes the reintroduction of wolves in 1995 as a widespread trophic cascade. According to the Britannica Encyclopedia, a trophic cascade is an ecological phenomenon triggered by the addition or removal of top predators and involving reciprocal changes in the relative populations of predator and prey through a food chain, which often results in dramatic changes in ecosystem structure and nutrient cycling. In short, reintroducing wild wolves transformed the park's physical environment and the behaviors of other animals, ultimately and dramatically restoring balance to the ecosystem in a remarkably short period of time.

So, what does a trophic cascade in Yellowstone have to do with our work in Colorado?

When I came to the Foundation earlier this spring, I brought with me an interest in how individuals and communities operate within a given system. More recently, the Foundation has been using the construct of 'systems mapping' to identify and understand components within complex systems, and how to best leverage those components to create positive, lasting change in Colorado communities. Similar to how you'd look at an ecosystem, systems mapping looks at all parts of a system against the whole and the connectedness within a system. The better we can understand the interaction between challenges within a system, the better positioned we are to address issues at a systemic level. This is key to creating the

future we envision that across Colorado each of us can say, “We have all we need to live healthy lives.”

Just like Yellowstone National Park, we have an ecosystem of health in Colorado. If we really want to learn as a community, we need to first understand the ecosystem of that community. Systems mapping can be used to understand the trickle down of community barriers, while exposing the levers we can pull – such as community assets and key players – to overcoming those barriers. When used well, systems mapping can be an effective tool for guiding the collective decision-making and action-taking processes.

Yet, understanding systems mapping is not the sole solution – it’s just the start. To create the change we seek, we must have a well-coordinated ‘learning loop’ within a given community – not unlike the behavior changes witnessed in the animals and ecosystem of Yellowstone. What we mean by ‘learning loop’ is that the process of testing a hypothesis (e.g., systems mapping), gaining new insights, learning from our errors and creating new decisions to develop a better hypothesis, is central to building and sustaining a “just-in-time” learning cycle.

We are focused on developing the core capability of our team at the Foundation, so that we are better equipped to work across socially constructed boundaries and create effective learning loops. Ronald Heifetz, a well-known leadership professor at Harvard University once said, “If people don't engage across the divide of their differences, there is no learning. People don't learn by looking in the mirror. They learn by talking with people who have different points of view. In a sense then, conflict is really the engine of adaptive work, the engine of learning." As our staff work to develop critical competencies that position them to authentically listen to community members, to span effectively across boundaries, and to create true community dialogue by using tools like systems mapping, we will then be able to create the impact we are looking to achieve.

At the Foundation, we aim to become a catalyst for change in the ecosystem of Colorado health. Two years ago, when our President and CEO Karen McNeil-Miller joined the Foundation, she knew it would be important to have a system for thinking about impact – and how we get there. As we look at new ways of thinking and behaving to understand Colorado's complex system of health, we have also been working diligently to apply the practice of systems mapping to think progressively about sustainable solutions. And it's no easy feat.

So far, we've been very intentional in our use of systems mapping to identify inequities by exposing all sides of the equation. Use of this tool offers us insights on how we can change the reality faced by far too many Coloradans, and the dialogue, on what is needed to raise us all to the same level of health opportunity.

We also think that systems mapping will help us identify and understand leverage points where we or our partners may be suited to lead the charge – and how we can make the most impact with our investments. For example, we want to understand and support a community's own narrative about health, which is really just knowing the sentiment and how they talk about the issues they experience.

In collaboration with key partners, we are using this new approach to further refine our current focus areas so we can make the most impact with our work. During this process, it's equally important for us to stay rooted in our commitment to bringing health in reach for all Coloradans. It's a commitment I witness daily by a team of dedicated staff who live and breathe to support Colorado communities – small and large, rural, frontier and urban.

The work we are hoping to realize in communities across the state is not that different than the symbiotic phenomenon occurring in Yellowstone National Park. What's happening on a systemic level trickles down into our communities, our workplaces and our homes. The hard work begins with us. As residents of

Colorado, neighbors, family members, friends, coworkers and individuals, each of us play a pivotal part in transforming the health of our communities. We are in this together.

Please engage with us in our efforts to ensure that across Colorado each of us can say: “We have all we need to live healthy lives.” Your voice and your perspectives are critical to making our vision a reality for all Coloradans.

Watch the video, “How Wolves Change Rivers” to draw your own correlations between the trophic cascade and our work to improve the health of Coloradans. Let me know what you think.

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