The Colorado Health Foundation™



Changing the Program Officer Role for More IMPACT

In my nine years here, I've had several different jobs, including program officer and portfolio director. In those roles, I had the opportunity to see firsthand how this organization, and the field of philanthropy, have changed in a variety of ways. It's been exciting, exhilarating and, yes, daunting at times. Now my job is to support a team of program officers who are actively leading an evolution of their own roles at the Foundation. They are "on the ground" in new ways and with a host of new responsibilities. From the Eastern Plains to mountain towns, from Denver neighborhoods to Alamosa county, our program officers are working more deeply with communities in order to realize our vision that across Colorado each of us can say: "We have all we need to live healthy lives."

Evolving how our program staff work to achieve impact is reflective of advancing philanthropy practices in the field and what we're learning about ourselves and the state of health from communities. As the world of philanthropy has evolved, the approach to "doing grantmaking" has changed dramatically in recent years. Our organization is changing too. Since Karen joined us two years ago as president and CEO, the Foundation has embraced a wider view of health, taken a health equity lens to all we do and committed to much deeper community engagement across Colorado. We've adopted a new vision for our work and incorporated new core values. We've enlisted a new approach to listening to communities. And, we're regularly tapping into a variety of data points, such as a Center for Effective Philanthropy Grantee Perception Report, to understand how well we're doing and how people experience us.

Last year, I wrote about how we've reset the expectations of how our program officers show up and work in communities. Today, we're a little further along.

Our Portfolio Director Jehan Benton-Clark has led an effort internally to redefine the role of the program officer through the new Community Engagement IMPACT Practice Model, which provides the guiding principles that represent the actions and behaviors that program staff should embody.

A few years ago, this role centered on developing strategic funding approaches, conducting due diligence, making recommendations for funding and managing grants. Today, program officers are the eyes and ears on the ground for the Foundation. And, community engagement is both a process and an outcome for us.

We are communicators, required to have timely and honest conversations regularly with the people, organizations and entities that comprise communities. We are learning to listen deeply and gain an understanding of how Coloradans are really experiencing life and how that impacts their health. We are seeking potential new applicants and opportunities to create connections between people and organizations who might be more impactful together. It involves working at all levels of community, from legislators and policymakers to community leaders to residents with the highest needs.

Through a new team structure and by implementing the IMPACT Practice Model, our program staff are focused on developing a stronger understanding of local communities and contexts. While this will take time, it's already fostered tremendous connections and knowledge for us. It means that our program staff are frequently on the road. And connecting doesn't stop there, as Karen is also taking regular road trips to continue connecting and learning about how communities across our state are doing.

So, what else is next?

A cornerstone of the IMPACT Practice Model is *listening*. For me personally, listening is something I keep at the forefront all the time. Whether through one-

on-one conversations, attendance at community events or a facilitated large-group discussion, listening is key to helping us understand more. It also is key to demonstrating respect and humility – we don't know all the answers, but we can hold space for those who have ideas, experience and wisdom to share.

We hope to bring you more stories of how program officers are working and what they're learning as they apply the IMPACT Practice Model throughout this year. In the meantime, I invite you to share any thoughts you have about our grantmaking approach with me directly or with our program officers as you see them in your communities.

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Blog

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