The Colorado Health Foundation™



Meeting Coloradans Where They Are

“We heard you love bacon!” This is a refrain that Hillary Fulton, senior program officer at the Foundation, is starting to hear often. As she travels throughout northeastern Colorado – meeting with everyone from community leaders to local farmers to residents – she’s been focused on listening, building relationships and really digging in to understand the nuanced dynamics at play when it comes to health in this beautiful part of the state. And it turns out, that listening has been a two-way street. Because everyone seems to know her favorite breakfast order.

Since early 2017, our program staff has been part of a transformative shift in how we do our work at the Foundation. We implemented a new Community Engagement IMPACT Practice Model, which marks a significant evolution in how and why we engage with communities across the state. Where in the past, we may have relied more on familiarity and existing relationships, the IMPACT Practice Model incorporates a health equity lens and a structure that requires and promotes broader and deeper engagement. Our program staff, more than ever before, is on the ground. They’re letting go of predictability and embracing vulnerability, and listening deeply to understand the embedded barriers to health that are only discoverable when we, quite literally, meet Coloradans where they are.

One year later, our program staff gathered at the Foundation to reflect on their experiences of implementing the IMPACT Practice Model; it was an opportunity to reflect, share, reframe and support each other. Over the course of a morning, with two panel discussions, our program officers shared their stories. What did we hear? That evolution and transformation aren’t easy, but they are necessary. That it matters when you show up, consistently, and sometimes without a scheduled meeting. That genuine relationships are the only way to work towards making an

impact, whether in Denver or La Junta, Carbondale or the San Luis Valley. That knowing the ecosystem of a community or a region is not enough; it's the honest conversations and the willingness to simply show up and be present on the ground in communities that matters most.

Most importantly, we heard that the structure of our IMPACT Practice Model is pushing our program staff to get off the beaten path, show up authentically and build trusting relationships.

Program Officer Rose Green shared that this new approach takes time – and therefore patience. But that it also creates new space for both relationships and understanding. She says, "This work is challenging but it is also a relief. It used to feel like I didn't have the full picture. The model has created an opportunity for me to do my work with a much better understanding of the community so that I can make better, more informed decisions." She also added, "You need to see people a lot by accident, as well as on purpose, to build a relationship and earn trust."

For Senior Program Officer Chris Smith, this means conversations over coffee in Pueblo and spontaneous runs or bike rides with local residents. For Program Officer Kyle Sargent, it means getting up at 3 a.m. and driving in the dark – which recently included avoiding cougar roadkill – so he can have breakfast in Julesberg. For Program Officer Sara Overby, it means letting go of her natural inclination to be a doer and a planner, and making room for spontaneity. And for Program Officer Melanie Herrera Bortz, it's the difference between teaching someone to fish and fishing alongside them.

Our team also knows that we are at the beginning of our learning curve when it comes to getting to know Colorado communities. As an organization, we are cognizant of the balance that must be found between authentically listening to the health needs of Coloradans across the state and advancing the Foundation's

priorities. But our commitment to working together with you on the issues that matter most is steadfast.

So as we look forward in 2018, our team will be on the road. You can expect to see them around – at coffee shops and diners, parks and local farms, community meetings and kitchen tables. They're there to listen and to get to know you, perhaps over your favorite breakfast. To ensure that every day, we are building our understanding of what it means to bring health in reach for all Coloradans.

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