



The Colorado Health Foundation™



Board Perspectives: How We're Listening to and Seeing Colorado Communities

In early June, the Foundation's Board of Directors hit the road on three separate tours of Colorado. Afterward, President and CEO Karen McNeil-Miller interviewed the Foundation's Board Chair Jerome Davis, regional vice president of Xcel Energy, on his perspectives and those of the [full Board](#).

Karen: So, Jerome: you and the rest of the Board were divided up into three groups, put on buses and sent out across our beautiful state. Why? We wanted to give you a sampler of the places we're working in, to give you a sense of the urban/rural divide and show you some grassroots organizations and bigger systems outside of Denver. Talk to me about the "so what?" of what you and the others saw and experienced.

Jerome: In one word, it gave me perspective. We saw so many have and have-nots. Being in and seeing community right in front of you brought me down to thinking, "I don't know everything. I should listen to what they have to say." All of us on the Board came away thinking that there is an incredible power in listening, and how important that is for us to really make a difference.

Karen: What issues were you and others most struck by?

Jerome: There were many issues related to health that we encountered, but I think it's safe to say that we were most struck by the lack of affordable and attainable housing, access to behavioral health services and affordable child care. Those three areas were critical issues in the communities we visited.



Karen: The Foundation recently invested in a [community land trust](#), and is taking on affordable housing in [our updated strategic framework](#). What aspects of housing did you and the Board learn about on these tours?

Jerome: It was striking to just see and meet people who simply can't get ahead. We talked a lot about how we need both grantmaking and policy advocacy to see real impact. Seeing folks who are putting more than 50 percent of their income into a place to live, if they're lucky, has changed my perspective on what our investments can be put towards. And, I know for some other Board members, it was hopeful to see housing models that allow Coloradans the opportunity to actually own a home versus rent one. It was hopeful to meet people who were in line to become homeowners. And, it was hopeful to see communities protecting themselves from losing their homes, too.

Karen: Behavioral health is a new [focus area](#) for the Foundation, as well. Talk to me about what you saw and experienced related to this.

Jerome: I think we've all heard the concept of how stigmatizing it can be to have your car parked in front of the mental health service provider building in a small town. We saw how that could be, and talked to people in the community about it. Many of our conversations came back to behavioral health. We heard about domestic violence issues, and the lack of prevention. We heard about higher rates of suicide in resort communities, and farmers and students committing suicide. There just aren't enough resources, and avenues to access those resources,

for folks to develop the coping skills needed to manage stress. And, there aren't enough providers, especially in rural areas.

Karen: A challenge we face as a Foundation is that we have to make hard decisions about where to spend our resources and focus our priorities. While addressing a lack of affordable child care is not necessarily a key priority of the Foundation at present, we are listening diligently to understand more about this challenge. What did you and the Board see or hear related to this?

Jerome: We talked to people who have two or three jobs, without any child care. We heard from multigenerational families with language barriers who are trying to make it work so their children are cared for while still generating an income. The four-day school week is an example where we are seeing unintentional consequences of policy. We heard a lot of stories of frustrations, inefficiencies of policy and politics.

Karen: I think you all came back with a good understanding of how the nuance in each community matters then. Is that a safe assumption?

Jerome: Yes, even though we know each community differs from the next, the tour really helped us recognize the amazing diversity of communities, ideas and dreams. One of our Board member's noted something important that we need to remember: there probably isn't a cookie cutter approach we can take, because there is so much diversity. Grantmaking might be the solution sometimes. Other times, it might be policy work. Maybe we need to invest in building the capacity of a community or their leaders. Sometimes we need both or all of it together.

Karen: What is the one thing you don't want to forget about this experience as a Board member?

Jerome: Someone on the Board said this, and it resonated with me: we need to keep the picture of the complexity of people's needs front and center. Stories were really important to us during this experience. We need more of them. Stories are

what really settle you into the lives of others, especially the Coloradans whom we want to impact most.

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BY

[Jerome Davis](#)

[Karen McNeil-Miller](#)