The Colorado Health Foundation™



Symposium 2018 Reflections Part Two - What We Learned

A couple days ago, we published our first reflections blog post about this year's Colorado Health Symposium. That post focused on the affirmations we walked away with as an organization. In this post, we want to share what we learned from the same event.

This year's conference focused on how to achieve equity by breaking down barriers that negatively impact individuals and families experiencing behavioral health and substance use challenges. And, we learned a lot about what it means to cover such a vast and emotional issue in the span of a few days.

Here are a few of those key takeaways:

"Behavioral health" as a conference topic is too big for a single event.

While we had glimpse into the complexities of hosting a conference on behavioral health, we didn't have clear foresight into the challenges with implementing a thoroughly meaningful conference. There are mental health disorders and diseases, addiction, suicide, substance abuse treatment and recovery, childhood trauma, gaps in social-emotional resiliency skills, stigma, race, economics, access to care and so many other issues related to inequity that we just couldn't dive into any one topic deeply enough. We recognize that the topic was too broad and that it should have been more narrow, more focused on a specific facet of behavioral health. This is something we're continuing to mull over.

We don't know what we don't know.

The area of behavioral health is a relatively new program focus for the Foundation. Our Nurture Healthy Minds focus area was launched earlier this year,

and we arrived at the Symposium ready to listen and learn. It was probably too early in our own work to have chosen a topic we are still learning so much about. You can see from attendee feedback that there are many considerations we can take moving forward with this topic:

- *"I think you can even go further by thinking about and creating a 'trauma-informed' conference agenda and format so people can have the space and support to process what they are learning about equity and why inequities exist… Equity work requires both agitation and discomfort AND healing."*
- *"I think there could have been a greater focus on the root causes of inequities in behavioral health. While this was part of the symposium's theme this year, I am not sure I came away from the event having learned more about the role of institutional oppression in our past and current state of behavioral health as a country and state."*

Sharing and hearing personal stories – some that involve reflection on personal painful experiences – require processing time, opportunities for self-care and other outlets.

Highly emotive storytelling requires preparation and room for deep listening. As mentioned in my last post, many of the personal experiences presented were raw, with the vulnerability on display emotional for many and overwhelming for some. That was intentional on our part. We believe there is value to being pushed outside of our comfort zone when it comes to sensitive subjects that affect our health.

At the Foundation, one of our cornerstones is to be community-informed. Our take on that in the Symposium setting is to hear experiences and stories. It is imperative to include the voices of those who are coping with behavioral health challenges in conversations that pertain to their lived experience. Again, they are experts in ways that others are not.

All of this being said, we learned that we could have better prepared attendees for some of the potentially triggering subject matter presented. We recognize that emotive storytelling to combat stigma requires audience preparation and resources. Included here are several key resources on behavioral health support for anyone who could use them. If you or someone else is going to view our archived live streams from the event, I encourage you to keep this list by your side.

We must think holistically in our event settings about addressing people, practice and policy when it comes to behavioral health and other complex ecosystems.

We mostly focused on "people" during this year's event. And while there were clear threads of discussion focused on policy, we didn't get into the systems-level discussions that many expect and want us to bring forward. Part of what we learned is that we didn't make it clear that our intention was to focus on people experiencing behavioral health issues. We learned the importance of being clear and anticipatory about that with attendees. And we need to strike a healthy balance across those three areas. For example, attendees shared that:

- *"There was too much focus on the problem, and not enough on best practices and solutions we can work on as a state."*
- The Symposium was a: *"Missed opportunity to discuss practical next steps of systems-level work and community level innovation to address mental health and addiction inequity."*

In the future, we look to find a better balance at the conference – including fair shares of discussion on people, practice and policy. We will continue to think about this feedback as we design upcoming events. Tackling systems- and policy-level solutions are key to our strategic process and to the experience we want to provide you at the Symposium.

I am moved by the energy and fervor we heard from attendees who are committed to make real lasting change happen for Coloradans – to bring health in reach for those whom it isn't. I encourage continued listening and sharing when it comes to behavioral health realities. And we will continue listening and learning from you as we navigate this complex ecosystem together.

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Blog

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