The Colorado Health Foundation™



Built on our Backs: Black Labor and the Fight for Justice

*By Amari Affinity Group, The Colorado Health Foundation**

At The Colorado Health Foundation, honoring and uplifting Black history is not just a February focus; it's a daily commitment. Black history is living history, shaping the present and the future, and the story of Black labor is central to this narrative. Further, recognizing our past and its lasting impact is essential to forging a future rooted in equity and justice.

The 2025 Black History Month theme, African Americans and Labor, calls us to examine the undeniable impact Black workers have had in shaping this country. For generations, Black workers have led the way toward fair pay, safe jobs, and economic justice—not just for ourselves, but for everyone. Work has always been more than just an economic activity for Black and African American people; it has been a defining force in shaping American history, culture and resilience. It includes not only traditional employment but also community organizing, voluntary service and institution building. From fighting for workers' rights to building the very infrastructure that sustains the U.S., Black labor has propelled America forward.

While we celebrate these contributions, we must also confront the hard truth: the legacy of anti-Black racism continues to shape economic opportunity today. The effects of enslavement, exploitation of Black labor, discriminatory hiring practices and more have compounded over time and are directly linked to the modern racial wealth gap. A Brookings Institution report highlighted that between 2019 and 2022, the median wealth gap between Black and white households expanded by nearly $50,000 in the US, reaching a staggering $240,120. Given the connection

between wealth and health, this gap is a very troubling driver of inequity. It does not merely represent an economic disparity—it is a crisis with direct consequences for health, housing, education, and generational stability.

At The Colorado Health Foundation, we recognize that economic opportunity is a key driver of health and well-being. Our work across the state centers on advancing health equity by addressing the systemic barriers that impact economic mobility, especially for communities of color and rural Coloradans. Through investments in workforce development, small business support and community-driven initiatives, we partner with organizations that are building pathways to generational wealth. Black staff within the Foundation play a vital role in these efforts, engaging with local leaders, advocating for policies that disrupt economic disparities, and ensuring that funding reaches Black-led and Black-serving organizations. Our work is not just professional—it is deeply personal, rooted in the lived experiences of and a commitment to collective progress.

While progress has been made, the persistence of the racial wealth gap signals that past injustices continue to shape economic realities and health today. Meaningful and sustainable change will require bold actions that reshape deliberately inequitable policies and entrenched systems. It's time to do more than acknowledge inequity—we must work to dismantle it. Here is what you can do:

- **Educate yourself:** Dive deeper into the topic of Black labor by learning more about its history and policy proposals to address the racial wealth gap. The Urban Institute has a series of papers offering critical insights on this topic. Also, take time to learn about and celebrate Colorado's unique history. The Blair-Caldwell African American Research Library on Welton Street in Denver, as well as Dearfield in Weld County, are among several spots to visit and learn more about the Black experience in Colorado

- **Advocate for change:** Get involved in your community and support policies that disrupt systemic inequities. Here's a list of things you can do to push for change in your community
- **Support Black-owned businesses:** Make a conscious effort to support Black-owned businesses in your community, contributing to their economic success. The Colorado Black Chamber of Commerce's directory can help you identify local businesses
- **Practice self-care:** Self-care lays the foundation for sustained action in support of health equity and racial justice

Conclusion

The 2025 Black History Month theme, African Americans and Labor, powerfully reminds us of the essential role that Black labor has played in America's progress. By exploring the struggles, triumphs, and ongoing challenges of Black labor, we gain a deeper appreciation of its impact on history and its relevance to health equity and racial justice today.

Without meaningful reform, economic injustice will persist and reinforce inequities in health and well-being for generations to come. So, as we honor Black labor, past and present, let's commit to action. Let's commit to justice. And let's demand a future where Black work is not only acknowledged but fully valued and equitably rewarded.

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* The Amari Affinity Group is an internal employee group at The Colorado Health Foundation dedicated to supporting the Black community and uplifting Black professionals both internally and externally through fellowship,

collaboration and learning. This piece reflects our collective commitment to honoring Black history, acknowledging the enduring impact of Black labor, and advocating for economic justice across Colorado.

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