The Colorado Health Foundation™

Why Healing and Wellness Matter for Community-Led Change

Communities bring unique strengths, lived expertise, and a deep understanding of the factors that shape health equity in their lives. When people who are directly affected by a challenge identity, design, and implement solutions, they build collective voice, strengthen community power, and drive meaningful change. Many communities and the organizations that support them are facing overlapping pressures, from long-standing systemic inequities and chronic underinvestment to ongoing political and economic uncertainty. These realities not only strain programs and systems; they can make it more difficult for community members to fully engage in the sustained work of identifying challenges, developing solutions, and leading change.

These pressures also take a toll on people's individual and collective health and well-being. Healing and wellness are not optional or "nice to have" add-ons in this context. They are essential conditions and practices for communities to thrive, to care for one another, and to respond creatively to their own challenges. When people have the time, space, and resources to heal and build resilience, they are better equipped to exercise community power over the long term.

What Do We Mean by "Healing" and "Wellness"?

Healing and wellness take many forms and look different for every community and individual. Healing is the process of acknowledging harm, centering those most impacted, and supporting restoration of dignity, connection, and belonging

in ways defined by community. Healing is multi-dimensional and culturally rooted and defined. For many, healing exists in practices that are held and led by the community itself – from cultural and ancestral wellness traditions to collective care, belonging, and opportunities for rest, reflection, and resilience building. These approaches are grounded in the idea that well-being is shaped not only by individual health, but by relationships, shared identity, and mutual support.

Wellness is the presence of conditions that allow individuals, organizations, and communities to thrive. It includes the resources, practices, relationships, and structures that support physical, emotional, mental, cultural, and collective well-being.

Healing helps address the impacts of harm. Wellness helps create conditions for people and communities to thrive. While distinct, they reinforce one another and are often inseparable in practice. Both healing and wellness honor the knowledge, wisdom, and lived experience that communities already hold and have sustained across generations.

Healing as a Strategy, Not Just a Support

“Supporting community agency is both powerful and restorative. When communities determine how to come together, they draw on their knowledge, skills, resources, and voices to advance community power,” said Wendy Talley, senior program officer at The Colorado Health Foundation. “As groups engage in healing and wellness practices, they can recover from trauma while sustaining and accelerating community-driven work.”

Healing and wellness are not just supports for the individuals and organizations providing essential services across Colorado—they are investments in the health of our entire state. When the people and organizations strengthening communities have the resources to heal, recharge, and thrive, Colorado is healthier, more resilient, and better equipped to meet the challenges ahead.

For community leaders and organizations on the frontlines, healing practices help prevent burnout, reduce attrition, and help people stay engaged over the long term.

Healing can also act as a strategy to strengthen trust. Building trust among colleagues, across organizations, and within communities strengthens relationships and collective capacity to act together. Healing is a critical part of the process of systems change work. By investing in wellness, communities build the capacity, agency, and self-determination that enable people to lead with clarity and purpose. Healing is foundational to creating lasting, systemic change.

Healing takes different forms across communities, and that diversity is a strength. What matters most is creating the trust and time needed for communities to define what healing and wellness means for themselves and to lead those efforts in ways that feel authentic and sustaining. Philanthropy can play a critical role by investing in spaces that nurture wellbeing, reflection, and connection alongside programmatic outcomes. For example, The Colorado Health Foundation recently supported a Healing-Centered Leadership Cohort, nonprofit leaders were able to explore healing-centered leadership practices and build the resilience needed to sustain themselves, their organizations, and the communities they serve. When philanthropy and partners fully and holistically invest, healing becomes a powerful driver of impact. By honoring community wisdom and supporting long-term healing, we strengthen communities' ability to build healthier futures rooted in dignity, agency, and possibility.

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