



The Colorado Health Foundation™



CASE STUDY

From Vision to Venture:
Place-Based Investing in BIPOC Women
Entrepreneurs in Rural Colorado

Introduction



At The Colorado Health Foundation, we believe that community-rooted entrepreneurship is essential to building a fair and thriving economy, especially in rural areas and for people who have long been excluded from opportunity. We know that health doesn't start in the doctor's office; it starts with access to meaningful work, stable income, and a sense of agency. That's why we use all the tools at our disposal—including grants and impact investments—to help transform the conditions that shape health.

In Southwest Colorado, we saw an opportunity to do just that. Rural Latina and Native American women, in particular, were facing persistent barriers to launching and growing small businesses. Even when ideas, ambition and talent were abundant, access to capital and culturally relevant support often remained out of reach.



Economic development is a powerful lever in the fight for racial justice, particularly in rural communities, where investments must be grounded in local culture and the voices of those most affected. As a CDFI, First Southwest Bank is rooted in community and remains committed to being a trusted partner across the San Luis Valley region.

— *Monique Johnson, Sr. Program Officer at CHF*



In response, we partnered with First Southwest Community Fund (FSWCF) and First Southwest Bank to help seed and grow the Rural Women-Led Business Fund. Our investment included **\$2.5 million in low-interest loan capital** through a program-related investment, paired with **\$700,000 in grant support** to help fund technical assistance, outreach and wraparound services. This combination of financial tools helped create a platform for rural women, especially women of color, to bring their business ideas to life and thrive.

Since launching the fund in 2019, **42 women-owned businesses**—about half led by women of color—have opened across the region, supported by more than **\$4.8 million in loans and thousands of hours of training and guidance**.

This case study highlights what's possible when place-based investing is aligned with the lived experience of local communities. It tells the story of how philanthropic capital can help shape inclusive economic systems and what it takes to invest in the people, not just the projects.

You'll hear from some of the women whose businesses are now anchoring their towns, creating jobs, and contributing to community vitality. And you'll see how impact investing—when combined with trust, time and local wisdom—can help move us closer to health equity in every corner of the state.

Investment Outcomes



Inclusive Economies



Mobilized Capital



Wealth Building



Financial Sovereignty



Quality Jobs



Racial Justice



Power Shifting



Gender & LGBTQ+ Justice

A Closer Look at Southwest Colorado



Southwest Colorado is a region of natural beauty, deep cultural roots and enduring resilience. Stretching from the Sangre de Cristo Mountains in the east to the Utah border in the west, this area includes the high-altitude San Luis Valley and communities across 14 counties, each shaped by a unique mix of history, heritage and geography.

The San Luis Valley alone spans 8,000 square miles, with the Rio Grande River beginning its journey through farmland and desert from its headwaters in the San Juan Mountains. The region is home to a significant number of Hispanic and Indigenous families, including multigenerational residents and more recent immigrants. Its legacy includes colonization by Spain and the U.S., layered atop the ancestral presence of several bands of Ute people.

Today, approximately 161,000 people call this part of Colorado home. Durango, the largest city, has fewer than 20,000 residents. In many towns and rural stretches, economic opportunity remains hard-won. Counties like Alamosa and Costilla have faced persistent poverty for decades, with neighboring Saguache close behind.

But numbers never tell the full story.

What we see across this region is a vibrant spirit of women raising families and starting businesses, of neighbors lifting each other up, and of ideas ready to take flight. What's often missing are the resources to match that energy: access to capital, to mentorship, and to the kinds of financial partners who are willing to bet on community-driven solutions. That's where we saw an opportunity to help.



The Partners



This initiative came to life through shared commitment, local expertise, and complementary roles. While First Southwest Bank and its nonprofit affiliate First Southwest Community Fund designed and operate the Rural Women-Led Business Fund, The Colorado Health Foundation provided the financial investment to help make it possible.



1st SouthWest Bank

A Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) based in Alamosa, First Southwest Bank serves rural communities across southwest Colorado. Its leadership, including CEO Kent Curtis and then-Chief Development Officer Sherry Waner, recognized early on that traditional banking—even with CDFI flexibility—was not reaching all who needed it, especially women entrepreneurs and people of color.

The bank saw a potential solution through the USDA’s Intermediary Relending Program. However, as a for-profit entity, it wasn’t eligible. So, in 2015, it launched the First Southwest Community Fund (FSWCF), a nonprofit lending organization, to bridge the gap. As an affiliated nonprofit, FSWCF could assume greater lending risk, provide technical assistance, and meet borrowers where they are.

First Southwest Community Fund

Initially staffed by the bank, FSWCF was a small but mighty team. Sherry Waner led early outreach, community needs assessments, and resource building. Loan officer Naya Rodríguez managed everything from applications to disbursements and repayment.

In 2019, the team welcomed Cass Walker Harvey as Executive Director. Cass, a seasoned entrepreneur and founder of a women’s entrepreneurship program at Yale, reviewed FSWCF’s loan portfolio and saw an opportunity. Though some women were being served, women of color remained underrepresented.

She proposed a new fund explicitly focused on rural women entrepreneurs. With support from FSWCF board member Azarel Madrigal and the leadership team, the idea gained traction quickly. They knew such a fund didn’t exist in the region, and that it was long overdue.

They also knew they needed flexible capital and grant funding to make it real. That’s when they approached us.



Naya Rodríguez, Loan Officer



FSWCF Team

The Partners



The Colorado Health Foundation

As a foundation committed to improving health by advancing equity, we were eager to support this effort. We saw alignment with our priorities: economic opportunity, racial justice, and the health and well-being of women and families in rural areas.

Together with our Impact Investing and Community Investment teams, we structured a package that included \$2.5 million in low-interest loan capital (through a program-related investment), a \$250,000 cash deposit as a mission-related investment (MRI), and \$700,000 in grant funding for wraparound supports.

The capital allowed FSWCF to offer affordable, flexible loans. The grants enabled them to provide culturally relevant technical assistance, training, and mentorship. And we offered it all with an understanding that reaching populations historically excluded from economic opportunity requires risk—and trust.



“We expected repayment, but we also expected defaults, and we considered that a necessary part of the work. Equity and innovation require an appetite for risk, led by people willing to be comfortable being uncomfortable. The goal is for philanthropy to absorb the perceived high risk of defaults at the outset, in order to prove to traditional lenders and investors that portfolios focused exclusively on BIPOC entrepreneurs and women can demonstrate equal or even stronger risk profiles than their existing loans. At that proof point, more capital can begin to flow into the communities CHF exists to serve.”

— Dr. Ben Bynum, Impact Investing, Senior Director



Importantly, we didn't fund this alone. Our support was contingent on a shared commitment to equity, including ensuring that a significant portion of borrowers would be women of color. FSWCF embraced that fully. The result is not just a loan fund, it's a model for what's possible when local insight meets aligned investment. And we're proud to be a part of it.



S&S Pick-Up, Fort Garland, CO
*Rural Women-Led Business Fund
& FSWB Loan*

Better Cleaning Services, Alamosa, CO
Rural Women-Led Business Fund



What Made It Work



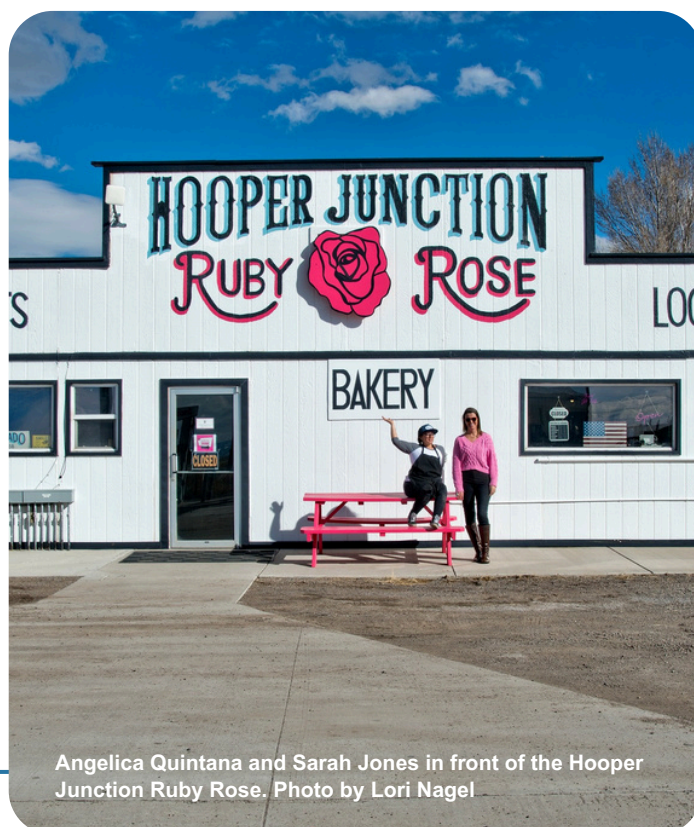
Backed by loan capital and supported by grant funding, the Rural Women-Led Business Fund moved from concept to community impact. Over the past five years, the Fund has deployed 44 loans totaling \$4.8 million to 42 women-owned businesses, with only two defaults. These numbers are substantial by any standard, but they only tell part of the story.

What truly powered this success wasn't just the capital. It was the approach: rooted in trust, built on lived experience, and designed with technical support that respected the realities and brilliance of rural women.



My booth at the farmer's market just happened to be next to another women-owned business who was also a Rural Women's Fund mentor. She connected me with it and the bootcamp. I learned so much information that made me feel like, 'I can do this. I can open up this small business!' They gave me knowledge and confidence. The loan allowed me to open a storefront in August of 2023 and purchase all of the start-up things.

**— Angelica Quintana,
Ruby Rose Bakery
from home-based, farmer-market
sales to storefront**



Angelica Quintana and Sarah Jones in front of the Hooper Junction Ruby Rose. Photo by Lori Nagel

A Culture of Respect

From the start, the First Southwest Community Fund (FSWCF) made respect a cornerstone of its work. CEO Rosy Aburto McDonough explained, “The key is being respectful and attentive. Listen to what business owners need, listen to what they want to do, their plans and their dreams, and then support them in whatever way we can.”

This kind of relational approach was especially important for first-time borrowers, many of whom had never accessed a personal loan, let alone business financing. As Sherry Waner, one of the Fund's founders, put it: “Some of these folks have never even had a car or house loan... So, asking the right questions in a way that shows empathy is critical. Sometimes the answer is 'not yet,' but with a roadmap and respect, they'll do the work. That trust opens doors.”

In rural communities where relationships are close-knit, trust is not a tactic—it's a way of life. “We're talking with communities where everyone knows each other,” Rosy added. “We see people at the grocery store, at the local café. We are part of the community.”

What Made It Work



Lived Experience Matters

That sense of belonging is deepened by the personal stories of the women leading this work. Naya Rodriguez, now Senior Lending Officer at FSWCF, grew up watching her parents build a food truck business from scratch. “They didn’t have all the formalities—LLCs or tax structures—but they knew how to do the work,” she shared. “Now, when others ask, my dad tells them, ‘Go ask my daughter.’”

Waner brings a similar perspective. “My dad was self-employed and tried and failed multiple times. He never got the support he needed—no access to financial services or coaching. That stayed with me. I knew what it looked like to be capable and overlooked.”



My practice definitely skyrocketed after receiving the loan; my clientele definitely grew significantly since having the brick-and-mortar office. I was working out of my home office. But as my clientele grew, I needed a place to meet clients in a more professional setting. Without the loan, it would not have been possible at all for me to open any kind of office.

— Angela Lee, Law Office of Angela Lee



Technical Support That Honors People

Access to capital is essential, but capital alone isn’t enough. Entrepreneurs supported by the Rural Women’s Fund repeatedly cite the technical assistance and belief from staff as being just as vital as the loans.

Early on, the Fund created an advisory committee of eight women—leaders and entrepreneurs representing the racial, cultural and linguistic diversity of the region. These members weren’t just invited to participate; they were paid for their time, and their insights shaped the design and delivery of the Fund’s offerings. As Cass Walker Harvey, who helped design the program, shared, “One committee member said, ‘The only reason I agreed to this is because you actually valued my time.’ That mattered.”

Their input ensured that bilingual women of color led the workshops and that the content was both culturally relevant and responsive to how women manage finances within their families and communities. This wasn’t a one-size-fits-all curriculum; it was a tailored, respectful model built in partnership with the very people it aimed to support.

Entrepreneurs who completed the 12-week business bootcamp received a \$2,000 grant and access to loan capital. Shorter technical training sessions on topics like QuickBooks or marketing were accompanied by grants of \$400–\$2,000, acknowledging both the time women invested and the barriers they overcame to attend.



Technical Support That Honors People

Beyond the practical tools, women gained something intangible but transformative: belief in themselves. As Naya Rodriguez reflected, “It gave them the confidence to take their passions and turn them into real-life businesses with real-life plans.” Or as Walker Harvey put it, “Yes, women needed the 101 business skills. But the real hurdle was internal—the confidence to believe they could do this, especially when society told them otherwise. That’s what we really invested in.”

Lessons Learned

Over the past five years, the Rural Women-Led Business Fund has shown that when capital, coaching and compassion come together, powerful things happen. The early results, strong loan performance, meaningful relationships, and deep community engagement, offer lessons that extend well beyond Southwest Colorado.

1 Loan capital must be paired with other supports.

Affordable loan capital is essential, but not enough. Entrepreneurs, especially first-time business owners and women of color, need more than financing. They need tailored, culturally relevant technical assistance and a clear, trusted guide through the process.

2 Relationships matter as much as resources.

Respect and trust are not just values; they are working strategies. By listening first, showing up consistently, and honoring people’s time and expertise, whether through stipends, encouragement, or proximity, the Fund built the kinds of relationships that money alone can’t buy.

3 Representation drives relevance.

Lenders and coaches with lived experience bring a different kind of credibility. When staff members know what it means to hustle, to fail and try again, to start a business from scratch—borrowers feel it. That connection breaks down barriers and builds confidence.

4 Confidence is often the biggest barrier.

Technical assistance helped women learn to read a balance sheet or manage QuickBooks. But what really changed the game was belief—someone saying, “You can do this. You deserve this.” Confidence was the invisible capital at work.

5 Equity requires intentionality.

CHF’s investments came with clear goals to reach women of color, and FSWCF met those goals. That kind of intentionality didn’t restrict the Fund’s impact; it focused it. Equity, when prioritized from the beginning, elevates everyone.

Sherpa Momo Ghar, Durango, CO
Rural Women-Led Business Fund



Looking Ahead

What does it take to support the entrepreneurial visions of rural women, including women of color?

The partnership between a CDFI bank, a mission-driven nonprofit loan fund, and The Colorado Health Foundation offers a working answer: low-interest capital, culturally relevant technical assistance, and a delivery model grounded in compassion and discipline. Initial results suggest that the approach is effective. But success in community-rooted work is not measured in five-year increments, it's measured over generations.

Azarel Madrigal, former FSWCF executive director, put it plainly:

“I'm proud of the work that I got to do and the progress the program and the women have made, but it's hard to truly call it successful. Let's see what it produces five to ten years from now.”

At The Colorado Health Foundation, we know transformation takes time. And we believe this work, this partnership, is planting seeds that will grow long beyond the life of any single loan. So come back in ten years. Hear the stories of the women who built something bold, and the partnership that stood beside them.

To learn more about Impact Investing through The Colorado Health Foundation, visit <https://coloradohealth.org/funding/impact-investments>.