



# GROWING HEALTHY COMMUNITIES COALITION

In 2014, The Colorado Trust launched the **Health Equity Advocacy (HEA) Strategy**, a multi-phased investment in building a strong and diverse field of health equity advocates to ensure equitable health outcomes for Colorado's most vulnerable. A centerpiece of the second phase of this strategy (2015-2016) included providing financial and capacity-building support to a cohort of direct service, community organizing, and policy advocacy organizations across the state. This support was designed to strengthen individual and collective capacity to "seed" an emerging health equity advocacy field in Colorado.

The following is part of a "**Seeds of the Field**" series of profiles of each of the 17 cohort members funded in the second phase of the HEA Strategy.

## Seeding a Health Equity Advocacy Field: The Story of Growing Healthy Communities Coalition

The [Growing Healthy Communities Coalition](#) (GHCC) is a multi-sector collaborative of approximately 50 diverse stakeholders in Montrose County representing agriculture, public schools, public health, health care, local recreation districts, faith-based and non-profit groups, federal food assistance programs, and other state/local government agencies. Montrose County is a large and geographically diverse but sparsely populated area--reaching from the Continental Divide to the Utah border. The enormous land mass of the Uncompahgre Plateau separates the communities of Paradox, Nucla, and Naturita, or the "West End", from the communities of Montrose and Olathe as well as from county services.

GHCC's health equity advocacy work is conducted through its Health Equity Advocacy Team (HEAT), a group of organizational leaders and community members who believe that diverse voices and equal access to community resources are necessary so that all members of their community have the freedom to enjoy a healthy lifestyle. The first phase of the HEA Strategy supported the formation and early growth of HEAT. HEAT aims to create pathways to encourage and support those who are affected by health disparities to have a voice in the community and identify opportunities for agencies, organizations, and community members to lift up health equity priorities and drive toward lasting systemic changes. Through HEAT, GHCC's Phase 2 work focused on educating its community on health and racial equity, developing community leaders to identify their own health equity priorities, and building relationships within city and county systems to drive the process toward lasting systemic changes.



## GHCC's Phase 2 Work

GHCC is located in a largely conservative environment with little racial and ethnic diversity. In this context, GHCC, in partnership with the Hispanic Affairs Project, co-hosted a Health Equity Learning Series on racism and the effects in their community. This series helped shed new light on discrimination in their community, created a safe space for discussion, and promoted cross-cultural collaboration through networking and learning together.

GHCC launched HEAT RISING in Phase 2, a civic engagement and leadership development program designed to affirm affected populations' authority and amplify their voice. Community leaders who went through the training provided testimonies and documentation of cases of "Notarios Publicos" during hearings and committee meetings at the state capitol. "Notarios Publicos" are unauthorized practitioners of immigration law who take advantage of immigrants who are trying to receive legal services. Typically, these practitioners have little or no training in immigration law and procedures and often charge exorbitant fees for unnecessary or substandard work, refuse to return documents

to clients, and threaten to report their clients' immigration status to authorities. The passage of the HB 16-1391, which created a prohibition against non-attorneys providing legal services related to immigrant matters, was a great victory to improve the state driver's license program for the immigrant community in Montrose County and gave local leaders the opportunity to advocate at the state level on behalf of their community members.

To embed the work of GHCC and HEAT within county systems, they have begun deepening relationships with county officials to educate them on racial and health equity issues. GHCC has become a thought partner with Montrose County, helping them integrate a health equity lens into their policies and talking to them about how racism affects their community.

### Laying the Groundwork for an Emerging Field

GHCC strengthens an emerging health equity field by lifting up affected population's stories in the rural community context and developing local leaders to advocate for health equity issues at the local and statewide level. Community conversations and policymaker education about racial and health equity has laid the groundwork and planted the seeds for health equity advocacy work to spread throughout the county and across the state. These conversations create opportunities for local leaders to form new narratives on how environmental, political, and economic factors lead to health disparities. GHCC Executive Director Abbie Brewer elaborates,



**I feel like this work has kind of like a domino effect because if I'm talking about health equity advocacy with the community of Montrose it sparks something within the city and moves out from there."**

– Abbie Brewer, Executive Director

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Moving forward, GHCC plans to continue to be a thought partner to other rural communities that are doing racial and health equity advocacy and will leverage HEA cohort relationships as the cohort continues to build the health equity advocacy field for Colorado's rural and urban communities.

## Looking Forward

Beginning in 2017, the 17 HEA cohort members, including GHCC, are launching a new phase of work focused on further cultivating the seeds collectively planted across the state in Phase 2. Ultimately, guided by common values and empowered communities, cohort members will be aligning their change efforts to dismantle structural and racial inequities and build equitable health systems so that all Coloradans can thrive. GHCC is poised to serve as a leader in this collective endeavor.

### Highlights: Growing Healthy Communities Coalition's Seeds of the Field

- More conversations about health equity within Montrose County that are centered on race and racism
- Cadre of local community leaders with growing capacity to identify and advocate for their own health equity priorities
- New and strengthened partnerships with statewide and regional partners that can be leveraged to increase education around how health inequities affect rural communities
- Stronger relationships with city and county policy- and decision-makers than can be leveraged for regional, systemic change

