



# STAPLETON FOUNDATION FOR SUSTAINABLE URBAN COMMUNITIES

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 Stapleton Foundation for Sustainable Urban Communities

Dedicated to creating a culture in which all people have an equitable opportunity to achieve the health they desire, the *be well Health and Wellness Initiative* of the Stapleton Foundation for Sustainable Urban Communities (*be well*) is a key partner in building a health equity advocacy field in Colorado. Its grassroots approach to addressing the overall health and well-being of the community provides a unique and valuable perspective to health equity advocacy efforts.

Located at the site of the former Denver Airport, the Stapleton area began as seven square miles of runways, prairies, weeds, and tons of leaked jet fuel and toxic chemicals.



The area is being transformed into neighborhoods that house multiple businesses, over 4,500 homes, schools, parks, and open spaces. To foster the overall health and well-being of Stapleton and its surrounding neighborhoods, the Stapleton Foundation for Sustainable Urban Communities (Stapleton Foundation) advocates for, achieves, and sustains the social and environmental goals of the Stapleton Redevelopment Plan. Specifically, the foundation focuses on ensuring the health and well-being of residents in five urban Northeast Denver and Aurora neighborhoods by promoting strong connections, building community capacity for equity-focused advocacy, providing economic and lifelong learning opportunities, and providing safe and equitable access to parks and open space.

As a result of *be well* efforts, at the launch of Phase 2, the Stapleton Foundation had a strong resident leadership and engagement model and had already been engaging in advocacy on a number of community-raised issues, including ineffective public transit and increasing opportunities for physical activity. As part of its field-building efforts, the foundation staff hoped to share its model with others engaged in health equity advocacy and to work with partners to gain a deeper understanding into how racial inequities lead to the challenges faced by some of the most vulnerable residents in Northeast Denver, Aurora and the state.

### **Stapleton Foundation's Phase 2 Work**

Throughout Phase 2, the Stapleton Foundation continued its community organizing work, with *be well* Block Captains at the heart of its success. *be well* Block Captains are neighborhood leaders who work to improve health in their communities. They receive significant training and support to develop their skills in community mobilization and health education. The training immerses participants in grassroots efforts that teach them how to effectively articulate their needs and build public will to support equitable policies. Upon completion of the training, *be well* Block Captains are "on the ground" knocking on doors, with the passionate intent of organizing their family members, friends and neighbors to improve and maintain their health and that of their community.

A unique aspect of the *be well* approach to resident leadership and engagement includes a layered training structure that enables residents to participate at a level that meets their capacity. As a result, Stapleton has a robust cadre of resident leaders who are engaging their community members and encouraging their involvement across a number of issues. For example, the Block Captains engaged in "get out the vote" activities, including participation in voter registration drives at key community events and at the Denver Department of Environmental Health's *PhotoVoices* Exposition.

The Block Captains also played critical roles in the success of the foundation's efforts on transit solutions and healthy and active living. Through its *be well Transit Community Conversations*, over 200 residents learned about the public input process and how to formally share their concerns with the Regional Transportation District and, as a result, have been actively providing input at public hearings. The Stapleton Foundation was invited to share its transit-focused work to leaders in the public health arena, ultimately delivering four presentations and leading a roundtable discussion on this topic for the American Public Health Association.

*be well* Block Captains also include a team of passionate youth who lead efforts to raise visibility on health issues impacting young people in their community. The youth Block Captains professionally produced two healthy-living videos—one focused on healthy eating and the other focused on anti-bullying efforts and mental wellness for youth. These videos will be shared with schools and the Mental Health Center of Denver, and are slated to be broadcast through Denver Health's *Kids Zone* television channel. The Block Captains also helped to secure \$400,000 to support the development of culturally appropriate health and wellness programming at the recently opened Moorhead Recreation Center in Northwest Aurora.



**We believe that community engagement is key in building the field. But there has to be a model that allows communities to have their own identity, while still providing a structure that they can work within to move them to the next level.**

— Alisha Brown, Vice President

While the work of the foundation is focused on the Stapleton area, the foundation's leaders knew that the Block Captains model could serve as a valuable contribution to the field of health equity advocacy. The HEA cohort provided a perfect opportunity to test the model in different communities. With support from an HEA technical assistance grant, the foundation's *be well* staff partnered with the Asian Pacific Development Center to implement the model within the Karen refugee population, with the goal of building a pipeline of Asian and Pacific Islander immigrant and refugee community leaders. The foundation also partnered with Northwest Colorado Health to bring the model to Steamboat Springs and test its application in rural communities among a primary Latino population. Foundation Vice President Alisha Brown expressed excitement about their ability to expand the work, and gratitude for the learning opportunities it afforded. Based on lessons learned, Brown intends to further refine the model so it can more easily be adapted to the diverse contexts of Colorado and, potentially, our nation.

## Laying the Groundwork for an Emerging Field

Moving forward, under the leadership of a new Chief Executive Officer, the Stapleton Foundation will make affordable housing a top priority. At the same time, it will continue to drive advocacy and civic engagement on other community-defined issues of concern and grow its cadre of Block Captains, with a particular emphasis on further engaging youth. Foundation staff shared that they will also be focusing on reframing their efforts to underscore the foundation's larger imperative around health equity so that their efforts are understood as connected to something greater. As a result, individual campaigns—such as those for improved physical fitness or transportation systems—will be understood as “more of a social justice movement that builds demand for changes in social conditions to advance health equity.”

## Looking Forward

Beginning in 2017, the 17 HEA cohort members, including the Stapleton Foundation, 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. The Stapleton Foundation is poised to serve as a leader in this collective endeavor.

### Highlights: Stapleton Foundation's Seeds of the Field

- Cadre of resident leaders supporting advocacy and community engagement
- Strong resident leadership model that can be applied across diverse contexts
- Greater visibility around role of environmental context in influencing inequitable health outcomes
- Youth-produced media products addressing mental and emotional health issues

