



CENTER FOR HEALTH PROGRESS

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 Center for Health Progress

For 20 years, [Center for Health Progress](#)—formerly known as Colorado Coalition for the Medically Underserved—has been dedicated to creating justice and equity in Colorado’s health care system. Its mission—to create opportunities and eliminate barriers to health equity for Coloradans—is based on Center for Health Progress’ fundamental belief that health systems should work for everyone and that all Coloradans should have the opportunity to live a healthy life.

Center for Health Progress has three core operating strategies for achieving its mission: (1) policy advocacy to create change in health systems statewide; (2) community

partnerships and organizing to empower community voices to achieve health equity; and (3) communications to shift the public narrative and present complex issues in a clear, accessible way. With a membership base that includes 56 organizations and over 60 individuals, Center for Health Progress' extensive experience, broad reach, and relationships with a wide range of policy advocacy, grasstops, and grassroots organizations render it a vital partner in building a health equity advocacy field.

Center for Health Progress' Phase 2 Work

Center for Health Progress engaged in a tremendous amount of work over the course of Phase 2. In addition to its continued policy advocacy work and strategic communications to educate a range of audiences about health inequities, Center for Health Progress engaged in significant internal reflection on what it means to be a health equity organization. This resulted in what its executive director, Joe Sammen, describes as "significant shifts" in the organization, including changes to its board structure and recruitment strategy to recruit more diverse board members, the implementation of quarterly anti-racism and anti-oppression trainings, and all-staff attendance at a two-day Undoing Racism training.



Center for Health Progress staff at the launch of their new name and brand

Another important shift included a significant and strategic investment in "building out" staff to include a team of community organizers. The build-out was the result of deep thinking about whether their current relationships were enabling them to ensure that community voices were truly at the forefront of change. Sammen explained: "We gained a lot of clarity that the community relationships that we had were very much at the grasstops, and we didn't have as deep relationships—or really, in some cases, any relationships—with grassroots community members and those who are affected by the issues."

In addition to expanding their relationships to more intentionally include grassroots organizations and community members, Center for Health Progress leveraged its connections and engaged in strategic alliance building by convening the Colorado Network of Health Alliances. This network works to develop health care leadership, increase access to health care, and strengthen health care systems in its members' respective communities. Three of the alliance members are part of the HEA cohort,

including Grand County Rural Health Network, Northwest Colorado Health, and Tri-County Health Network. Sammen notes that their work together in the HEA cohort enables them to have a united front on key health equity issues and to leverage cohort expertise to build the advocacy capacity of alliance network members. For example they enlisted another cohort member, Together Colorado, to conduct trainings to “build the muscle of the network around community organizing.”

The Colorado Network of Health Alliances includes a robust group of community-based alliances and coalitions and thus the convening of this network represents an important field-building seed, given its collective span of 42 counties and approximately 900 members, and its shared commitment to achieving health equity and diminishing health disparities.

According to Sammen, “We’ve aligned the entire network around these true north goals—one is around health insurance coverage, one is around health systems transformation, and one is around health equity.”



When I think back just two years ago, even saying the word “racism” was almost taboo in Colorado and Denver in the healthcare space, and now it’s like a piece we hear all the time. I think as part of this cohort, as part of the field, and especially, definitely as a part of this work under the HEA grant, we’ve been on the leading edge of that shift in trying to push that dialogue through all of our different strategies. The shifts that have happened in the culture and narrative have been exciting.”

– Joe Sammen, Executive Director

Laying the Groundwork for an Emerging Field

Reflecting on the work that was seeded in Phase 2, Center for Health Progress’ staff feel a level of excitement about the shifts they are seeing in themselves and in the field. Its organizational journey was not without its challenges, though the resulting shifts are an achievement that Sammen acknowledges with pride, noting: “I think we’ve put a finer point on what it means to be a health equity organization in some meaningful ways.”

At the field level, Center for Health Progress staff note they are beginning to see promising shifts in the dialogue on health and health equity—shifts that acknowledge race and the role of racism in the persistence of inequitable health outcomes. The staff emphasize that this landscape change cannot be attributed to a single organization, but they are proud of the “very real ways [they] have contributed to shifting the dialogue.

Looking Forward

Beginning in 2017, the 17 HEA cohort members, including Center for Health Progress, 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. Center for Health Progress is poised to serve as a leader in this collective endeavor.

Highlights: Center for Health Progress' Seeds of the Field

- Strategic communications efforts to educate various audiences about health equity issues
- Robust and growing network of health alliances committed to health equity
- Relationships between grassroots and grassroots health equity organizations increased
- Stronger and more integrated role of community organizing in advocacy efforts

