

# NORTHWEST COLORADO HEALTH

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 Northwest Colorado Health

Since 1964 [Northwest Colorado Health](#) (formerly Northwest Colorado Visiting Nurse Association) has been providing comprehensive health resources and fostering community wellness for the residents of Northwest Colorado. While it has significantly expanded its reach and services over the years, the organization has remained constant in its belief that everyone has the right to achieve good health—regardless of income, race, age, gender, health status, or insurance coverage. The first phase of the HEA Strategy provided a timely opportunity for the organization to build their capacity to not only serve as a critical direct service anchor in the region, but to also step forward as a strong advocate for regional interests within an emerging health equity advocacy field in

Colorado. Phase 2 was envisioned as an extension of their efforts to build internal advocacy infrastructure, foster relationships with key decision-makers and influencers, and organize community leaders who could serve as partners in policy advocacy activities.

## Northwest Colorado Health's Phase 2 Work

Northwest Colorado Health's Phase 2 organizational development had a dual focus—to incorporate *advocacy* into their service model and integrate *equity* throughout organizational operations and programming. According to Chief Executive Officer Lisa Brown, Northwest Colorado Health was at a point of readiness for the former; as such, early on in Phase 2, advocacy became an integrated element of Northwest Colorado Health's strategic activities. Brown serves as the Chair of the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment's Health Equity Commission, and Northwest Colorado Health staff and board are active in monitoring bills that are priorities for public health, community health centers and the region.

Organizational culture change related to equity has been a longer and more complex process, but Northwest Colorado Health has taken steps forward in the last two years. Northwest Colorado Health staff and board have engaged around a health equity knowledge framework, a subset of staff participated in intensive racial equity-focused trainings, and Northwest Colorado Health formed an internal health equity advocacy committee to support increased organization-wide fluency around health equity at Northwest Colorado Health. While noting that Northwest Colorado Health is on a long-term journey, Lisa Brown reflects that—as a result of these investments—they have found shared language to reflect on equity as an organizational value, and to take specific actions such as hiring bilingual/bicultural staff, dedicating resources to outreach and engagement, and forming a language services department.



**Our story has been one of education and awareness... we learned a ton in the past two years about equity, about ourselves, about different ways to engage in community, different ways to run our operations.”**

– Lisa Brown, Chief Executive Officer

This work has extended to the larger Northwest Colorado community as well. Within a region described as not very racially diverse, Northwest Colorado Health has stepped forward as a facilitator of community dialogues on health equity. In partnership with The

Colorado Trust, in fall 2016, Northwest Colorado Health sponsored a Health Equity Learning Series event. Held in Steamboat Springs, the event focused on unpacking the range of social determinants that affect community health, and invited community members themselves to share challenges and identify solutions. Northwest Colorado Health has also partnered with others in the community to form a local Health Equity Advocacy Committee, now known as the Yampa Valley Committee for Social Change, to expand conversations about inequalities preventing racial, ethnic, low-income and other vulnerable populations from having a fair chance to achieve their optimum health. Finally, Northwest Colorado Health has also recently begun to adapt the Stapleton Foundation's *be well* model of community organizing to foster leadership in the region. While the program has been successfully implemented in five metro neighborhoods, Northwest Colorado Health is piloting the first rural variation of the program in the state.

### Laying the Groundwork for an Emerging Field


As an indicator of an emerging statewide health equity advocacy field, Northwest Colorado Health's participation in the HEA Strategy has led to a welcome infusion of resources into the region. In reflecting on their growth over Phase 2, Brown expressed an appreciation for Northwest Colorado Health's deepening partnerships with other rural organizations and expanding relationships to others with whom they might not be otherwise connected. She emphasized, "There are [metro] organizations in the cohort that we have zero natural overlap with in our service areas, target populations, anything." However, through their extended network, Northwest Colorado Health now has access to new ideas, tools, surveys, and models of health equity advocacy, community organizing, and leadership development that can be adapted to the specific context of the Colorado's northwest region.



**We're really far away from the capital and the whole scheme of things, so... I think we see ourselves... as a bridge between a broader group at home and a broader group across the state."**

— Lisa Brown, Chief Executive Officer

More importantly, the foundation that Northwest Colorado Health continues to build in the northwest region of Colorado is a critical seed within an emerging health equity advocacy field intended to span the rich diversity of the state. Historically, rural perspectives have been missing in equity-focused health policy conversations. Northwest



Colorado Health's own strengthened capacity to engage in equity-focused work and advocacy, and their efforts to build capacity of the larger region to address health equity through the Yampa Valley Committee for Social Change are instrumental in ensuring that—within ongoing and future statewide health equity work—Northwest Colorado's interests are front and center.

## Looking Forward

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

### Highlights: Northwest Colorado Health's Seeds of the Field

- Greater advocacy and equity capacity of Northwest Colorado Health as an anchor organization in the Northwest region of the state
- Community dialogues focused on health equity, with speakers from outside the region and state offering new perspectives
- New Yampa Valley Committee for Social Change in the region that is beginning to move forward with a regional vision for advancing health equity
- Emerging effort to develop a cadre of community leaders who can serve as front-line voices representing Northwest Colorado in health equity advocacy

