

# TOGETHER COLORADO

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 Together Colorado

A non-partisan, multi-racial, multi-faith community organization comprised of over 200 congregations, schools, clergy and faith leaders from Pueblo to Fort Collins, [Together Colorado](#) is dedicated to transforming communities through community organizing and serves as a key partner in building a health equity advocacy field throughout Colorado. Together Colorado believes that there are five essential cornerstones for human dignity— education, wholeness (health equity), economic justice, peace, and civil rights and responsibilities—and that directly addressing racial disparities and undoing racism at the systems level is key to success in these areas. Together Colorado works to put human dignity at the center of public life by training and equipping faith leaders and volunteer community leaders to resolve community issues on their own behalf at local, state, and national levels.



At the launch of Phase 2, Together Colorado expressed its desire to support HEA field-building by sharing its community organizing expertise, its deep experience working with faith-based leaders, and its extensive network of partner organizations working toward human dignity for all. Together Colorado saw Phase 2 as an opportunity to continue bridging the divide between grassroots leaders and policy advocates and to share its strengths with others in support of a growing field of health equity advocates.

### Together Colorado's Phase 2 Work

Phase 2 served as an ideal vehicle for Together Colorado to share its knowledge and experience with others who were working to achieve health equity. While this sharing often happened through informal connections (e.g. through phone calls with other cohort members or informal discussions at grantee convenings), Together Colorado also provided more formal training to organizations who wanted to incorporate community organizing principles and strategies into their work. With support from an HEA technical assistance grant and in partnership with the Center for Health Progress, Together Colorado conducted trainings in Glenwood Springs and Aurora focused on building core capacities in community organizing. Overall, 37 leaders from across Colorado completed the entire community organizing training, including staff from 10 cohort organizations.



**I'm really thankful to be a part of this cohort, especially after the November election, when we're talking about health equity and racial equity. We're in a really extreme time of urgency and so it helps to have a relationship with these different organizations who have powerful connections."**

- Kirsten Gunderson,  
Together Colorado  
Community Organizer

Together Colorado also benefitted from the deep knowledge and expertise held by other cohort organizations. As a result of inter-organizational sharing, Together Colorado strengthened its own efforts, particularly around non-emergency Medicaid transportation. Together Colorado staff had been experiencing significant challenges in this arena. Kirsten Gunderson, a community organizer, shared stories of community members being dropped off at the wrong facility, being left at health care facilities for three to four hours after discharge, or being completely abandoned by their drivers. Efforts to work with the transport provider were extremely frustrating and ultimately unsuccessful. Julie Reiskin, the executive director from another cohort organization, the Colorado Cross-Disability Coalition, suggested that power mapping (a strategy for identifying individuals that can support social change efforts) might help them develop a


more strategic approach to addressing the problem. Reiskin offered to provide a training and Together Colorado applied for an HEA technical assistance grant so that they could offer the training to the entire cohort. Participants note that the knowledge they gained about both power mapping and how Medicaid works in Colorado sparked rich group discussions about Medicaid's shortcomings, how they relate to their advocacy work, and how to apply their learning to their organizations' current campaigns.

In addition to these efforts, over the course of Phase 2 Together Colorado worked to mobilize communities around a number of issues of critical concern. It engaged in a comprehensive "Get out the Vote" campaign, which included a three-month door-knocking, phone banking, and pledge-to-vote card campaign. A key focus of this campaign was to educate the public about how the minimum wage in Colorado affected Colorado families. In addition, Together Colorado coordinated a non-partisan, multi-faith effort to educate the people of Colorado about the wording of Article II, Section 26 of the state constitution. Written in 1877, the article prohibits slavery and involuntary servitude "except when used as punishment for persons duly committed of a crime"—essentially, making it legal to treat incarcerated people as slaves. Together Colorado mobilized community leaders and congregations to educate the public about the existence and implications of Article II, Section 26. As a result, they grew a stronger powerbase around the issue of racial justice. The momentum created from this work resulted in a new racial justice movement which is being driven by leaders in the Black and Latino communities, as well as by those with mental health issues, all of whom have suffered from instances of police brutality.

At the same time, Together Colorado has been working with a group of multi-faith and multi-racial leaders to make their commitment to racial justice more explicit and concrete. Since July 2015, they have been working together to craft a [Moral Document for Racial Justice](#), which they describe as a "manifesto for action." The document's Statement of Purpose makes clear the urgent need for action, solidarity, and leadership towards racial justice across communities of faith, describing it as a "collective call to solidarity and to action in response to systemic problems that profoundly threaten the well-being of our people and stand as roadblocks to our success in the community."

### **Laying the Groundwork for an Emerging Field**

While much was accomplished in Phase 2, Together Colorado staff recognize that there is still a significant amount of work to do, particularly given current political and social climates and their potential impacts on policies that can profoundly impact the well-being of their communities. At the same time, staff express gratitude for the knowledge,



skills, and relationships they gained and deepened over the course of Phase 2, which is helping them to develop new and creative strategies for addressing the challenges they face in their work. As Together Colorado continues to knit together its networks and share its knowledge to support the growth of a health equity advocacy field, the level of skill-building, support, and solidarity Together Colorado has gained through its participation in Phase 2 will further strengthen its endeavors.

## Looking Forward

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

### Highlights: Together Colorado's Seeds of the Field

- Community organizing trainings that strengthen the efforts of organizations working towards health equity
- Trainings focused on the complexities of Medicaid and the benefits of power mapping
- Stronger powerbase for racial justice
- Manifesto for action around racial justice

