

Community Leaders in Health Equity Evaluation

Appendix B: Qualitative Analysis

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Appendix B: Community Leaders in Health Equity

Qualitative Analysis

Introduction

This appendix presents the full analysis of the qualitative data collected throughout the course of The Colorado Trust’s Community Leaders in Health Equity program (CLHE) for both the 2021 Cohort and the Continuing Track Cohort. These data included observations, focus group transcripts, and participant reflections. The full evaluation findings and recommendations, which triangulate data across data-collection methods, reside in [Chapter 3](#).

Methods

Observations

Two local, bilingual (English/Spanish) consultants took detailed field notes of activities during Cohort 2021’s 3-day convenings in November 2021, April 2022, August 2022, and November 2022. The number of participants ranged from convening to convening, with an overall range of 50 to 85. The consultants balanced the roles of participant and observer to construct descriptive field notes that accurately reflected what transpired at the meetings.¹ To support this approach, we organized the notes into two categories:

1. The first had a focus on describing the physical environment, noting the extent to which the sessions covered information and skills associated with health equity and leadership capacity building (e.g., discussions related to the social determinants of health, the practicing of leadership skills, community building, opportunities to share marginalized voices).
2. The second had a focus on how participants *engaged* with the content and experienced the program activities as evidenced by their words and behaviors. For the last three convenings, the focus switched from engagement to the impact of the activities on participants in terms of their learning about issues of discrimination, oppression, equity, health equity, and personal and professional growth while seeing themselves as change agents motivated to act, reflect, and engage in additional learning.

The consultants recorded their observations based on the activities presented in the Convening agendas. They then compared their notes and found high levels of agreement in the descriptions of the physical environment, content covered throughout the sessions, levels of participant engagement, and

¹ This approach to observation-data collection is more fully described by Merriam, S., and Tisdell, E. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. Jossey-Bass.

impacts of activities on participants. Specific details noted complemented one another and together provided a comprehensive description of participants’ experiences.

Focus Groups

Focus groups were facilitated with participants in both cohorts at the baseline and endline data points. For the 2021 Cohort, the evaluation team conducted the baseline focus groups at the November 2021 convening as well as virtually afterward due to a COVID-19 scare that restricted in-person participation. The endline focus groups took place in person at the November 2022 convening. Exhibit B1 provides a summary of focus group participation by location, language, and number of participants. Focus group language was determined based on the language preferences of the interested participants.

Exhibit B1. 2021 Cohort’s Focus Group Participation

Focus group	Survey wave	Location	Language	Number of participants
1	Baseline	Denver	Spanish	4
2	Baseline	Denver	English	2
3	Baseline	Denver	English	5
4	Baseline	Virtual	English	4
5	Baseline	Virtual	English	1
6	Endline	Greeley	English	5
7	Endline	Greeley	Spanish	2

Note. When only one person showed up to a focus group, the questions of the focus group protocol were used, but it became a one-on-one conversation.

The evaluation team invited the Continuing Track Cohort to participate in baseline virtual focus groups via the Participant Feedback Survey but gathering interest and follow-through on scheduling proved difficult. As an alternative, the local consultants offered in-person opportunities for individual or group conversations during the gathering in October 2021 in Pueblo. This invitation resulted in one focus group in Spanish with four participants and a conversation with an individual participant also in Spanish. At endline in May 2022, one focus group with 7 participants was held in English; monolingual Spanish speakers chose not to participate. Therefore, our endline analysis cannot be generalized to the entire group.

A third-party transcription service transcribed the audio recordings from the focus groups, and then the local consultants reviewed and cleaned the transcripts of the discussions they facilitated. Evaluation team members uploaded the transcripts to NVivo 12 in order to conduct thematic analysis. The evaluation team developed an initial qualitative coding scheme using a priori codes based on the [conceptual framework](#) and [evaluation questions](#). The evaluation team members reviewed one another’s coding and discussed divergent perspectives on the meanings and applications of specific codes. Emergent codes were added to account for concepts and themes not captured by the a priori codes.

Once all transcripts were coded, a bilingual AIR researcher queried the data set and summarized the emergent themes. The summary narrative was reviewed by the local consultants and further refined based on their feedback.

Participant Reflections

Participants were encouraged to submit self-reflections throughout the program. They were provided with a series of prompts and encouraged to reflect in a way that felt most comfortable to them, whether by responding in writing, drawing, or audio recording with their thoughts either by themselves, with a partner, or as a small group.

Participants in the 2021 Cohort submitted one audio-recorded and 43 written reflections over the course of the program. Uptake in the Continuing Track Cohort was smaller: participants submitted one audio-recorded and six written reflections over the course of the program.

The written reflections submitted by the 2021 Cohort were scanned and then uploaded to NVivo 12 for thematic analysis. Due to the much smaller sample size, the written reflections submitted by the Continuing Track Cohort were instead uploaded to an Excel spreadsheet for analysis.

Once all reflections were coded, a bilingual evaluation team member queried the data set and summarized the emergent themes. The summary narrative was reviewed by other members of the evaluation team and further refined based on their feedback.

Evaluation Advisory Group

Once the initial qualitative analysis of all the collected data was complete, a summary of 2021 Cohort findings was presented to that cohort's participants who chose to join its evaluation advisory group (EAG). The evaluation team held a series of feedback sessions during which findings were presented on a virtual call, and participants were asked to reflect on whether the findings resonated with their experiences, whether they had additional interpretations of the analyses, and whether anything seemed inaccurate. Their feedback on the clarity of the presentation of findings was also requested during these sessions. Thirteen 2021 Cohort participants formed the EAG, and each member received a \$50 gift card for their participation. The evaluation team engaged the Continuing Track Cohort in a similar process to develop a series of [report briefs](#) but did not engage that EAG in a review of the full evaluation analysis, as too much time had passed since the Continuing Track programming was completed.

Analysis: 2021 Cohort

Observations

Field observations during CLHE convenings showed a series of activities that guided participants in increasing their knowledge and understanding of oppression and inequity. Some activities focused on providing information to increase participants' knowledge (e.g., presentation of historical timelines, histories of resistance and disruption, and statistical data on classism and racism) with further personal reflections on those data. Other activities engaged participants in the exploration of relevant concepts (e.g., power and oppression) through immersive activities, such as that offered by the [Theatre of the Oppressed](#), while developing their skills (e.g., leadership, negotiation, and public speaking).

Each convening focused on different content, including racism, classism, sexism, and power and oppression, with an emphasis on how each relates to health and impacts health equity. Activities were designed to be mindful of networking and trust building among participants from different regions via changing seating arrangements, assigning participants to different activities, and engaging participants in daily opening activities that facilitated their getting to know one another in nonthreatening environments. Each day of the convenings included time for reflection or processing and self-reflection activities, partnered activities (e.g., [community counseling](#)), or small-group activities in which participants took turns answering reflective questions.

Language justice was addressed through simultaneous oral interpretation and the concurrent translation of all written comments, and all handouts and presentations were provided in both English and Spanish. Participants were always encouraged to use their preferred language (the language of their heart). Other equity practices included using inclusive language, offering prayer and lactation spaces, ensuring physical access, providing gender-neutral bathrooms, and taking frequent breaks. All convenings and activities took place in low- or no-scent spaces, and during the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of face masks was a requirement for unvaccinated participants and everyone in common spaces outside the meeting rooms.

COVID-19 statistics were provided at the beginning of each gathering and the [Transformative Alliances](#), LLC (Transformative Alliances), team encouraged people to take care of themselves and to follow any practices that made them feel safe and comfortable. When convening participants fell ill with COVID-19, the entire group was notified as soon as possible, and appropriate measures were taken (e.g., providing quick COVID-19 tests for everyone in attendance).

Convenings were primarily led by the copresidents of Transformative Alliances, and six other members of their team were often in charge of facilitating small-group activities, answering questions, and supporting all participants as required. One Transformative Alliances copresident and three of their facilitators were bilingual and able to present content and provide help to participants in their own language. Throughout the program, it was clear that participants felt comfortable with all

Transformative Alliances members, as participants frequently approached them with questions after activities.

The formats of the activities observed were varied and included lectures, video presentations, role-playing, games (competitive and noncompetitive), reviews of written content, question-and-answer sessions, and individual, paired, and small-group reflections. Through the activities, participants developed and practiced different skills, such as public speaking, active listening, negotiation, and team building. Additionally, throughout the sessions, participants learned vocabulary and information related to different types of oppression. Emphasis was placed on understanding and identifying the different types of oppression (e.g., the [four \(4\) I's](#)²: internalized, ideological, interpersonal, institutional) and on the development of plans for participants' personal and group projects, which were required to address health equity in their communities. Some activities asked participants to reflect on how the program content related to their personal, family, and lived experiences.

The Transformative Alliances team also carefully explained how some of the activities and content could provoke emotional reactions, such as anger, fear, defensiveness, numbness, or feeling threatened and unsafe, especially in participants who had experienced oppression but also in those who were from privileged groups. Although such responses were to be expected, they were not helpful when doing equity work, so the Transformative Alliances team encouraged everyone to be aware of their own responses and to take care of themselves. The facilitators advised individuals who benefited from oppression not to process their emotions with others from a group targeted by oppression. Participants were encouraged to talk with program leaders if these issues arose, highlighting the importance of addressing such feelings and engaging in their own healing work. Transformative Alliances also remarked that unconscious comments and actions could harm others and encouraged everyone to be mindful of their attitudes and behaviors while processing these issues.

Impact on Participants

Throughout the program, participants were observed becoming friendlier and more engaged with one another as they got to know one another better and had opportunities to work together on various activities. A sense of camaraderie was developed, with participants seen in animated conversations during meals, breaks, and at the end of each day. Even those for whom language seemed to be a barrier were observed communicating with one another. This change was also observed among participants from different regions, and some of them reported wanting to learn from each other, becoming interested in the work of those from other regions, and trying to find connections to their own work. They reported extending their social and professional networks and sometimes being surprised by how similar or different their experiences were even when living in different regions of the state. Solidarity among participants was greatly evident at the Grand Junction convening (the fourth of five in-person convenings), when more than 20 participants volunteered to help gender

²Note: The Chinook Fund uses this model but did not create the model. The original creators of the model are unknown.

nonconforming, nonbinary, and LGBTQ+ participants feel safe around unfriendly and possibly harassing external groups sharing the venue.

In addition to developing a sense of camaraderie, participants learned from and with one another, asking for one another's thoughts during small-group and individual activities as well as sharing reflections. During small-group activities, participants were seen actively listening to one another and giving space for others to share by asking for their thoughts and opinions. For example, participants were observed getting stuck on an activity and turning to their peers for help or clarification. They were also able to reflect and process with one another. Community counseling sessions in which participants would take turns answering reflective questions in pairs without the other person giving any verbal responses were a strong example of participants' being comfortable enough to share their own individual processing with one another. Beyond community counseling, participants were seen frequently engaging in reflective discussions with one another during breaks and after daily activities.

The CLHE program focused on getting participants to know and understand the 4 I's within the contexts of the different types of oppression as well as the intersections between them, all within the framework of their impact on health and health equity. Activities ranged from academic (e.g., reading definitions, sorting cases, and analyzing data) to playful and entertaining (e.g., trivia and vocabulary dominoes) while still being challenging in content. Role-playing activities (e.g., Columbian Hypnosis, and other Theatre of the Oppressed activities) gave participants opportunities to experience what it means to have power, be oppressed, or be in a position of privilege. Many activities encouraged participants to find ways to disrupt different types of oppression. Overall, program content and activities frequently provoked emotional reactions (e.g., a male participant realizing how he had raised his daughters in a sexist way). Some participants expressed surprise at realizing the impact of being oppressed while at the same time being privileged in other aspects of their lives.

With time, participants became more comfortable with the terminology and ideas, defending their positions and becoming more assertive. They also reflected on the impacts of oppression on their own and their families' lives, with some of them expressing the need to change the way they were parenting. Toward the end of the program—and especially during the presentation of their group and personal projects—it became clear that participants saw themselves as agents of change.

Throughout the program, participants learned to identify health and social problems that created health inequities in their communities. They also learned to identify when these problems were caused by oppression and what type of oppression. They engaged in root-cause analyses and in generating possible solutions. Through the guidance of the Transformative Alliances team, they recognized which solutions were actionable and identified potential allies in their community as well as possible barriers, and potential funders for implementing their project plans. At the end, each regional group and individual participant presented their plan to address health equity problems in their community, with some sharing how they had already begun implementing their plans.

Focus Groups

Findings from the focus group discussions with the 2021 Cohort were strikingly similar to those that emerged from the focus group discussions the year prior: (1) the facilitation provided by Transformative Alliances was high quality, (2) the learning activities were high quality, (3) participants found value in the new social network connections they made through the program, and (4) the learning opportunity was life changing. However, possibly because this was the last convening that participants would attend, the themes they discussed most were the value of the new social connections they made through the program and the life-changing aspects of the learning opportunity. Specifically, participants discussed what it was like to meet fellow Coloradans, how they saw these new relationships progressing, changes in their self-efficacy, and a blossoming desire to apply what they learned in their communities, workplaces, and families. These findings are explored in greater detail below.

Social Connections Formed

During the November 2022 focus group discussions with the 2021 Cohort, participants expressed immense appreciation for the opportunity to meet people from all over Colorado. For some, this was one of the most important experiences afforded by CLHE. Participants reported learning a great deal about one another, the organizations other participants were associated with, and the communities they came from. In fact, some participants acknowledged that they were not aware that some of the towns from which other participants came from even existed and that if they were aware, they had made assumptions about the people who lived there—assumptions they learned were incorrect. Being able to travel to and talk to people from different parts of Colorado opened participants' eyes to the reality that the state is not a monolith. They realized that the challenges experienced and initiatives undertaken across the state affect each community uniquely and that there are passionate activists everywhere. Finally, in addition to being impressed by the diverse geographic backgrounds of the people they met, participants were also struck by the diversity in age. They appreciated the opportunity to learn from the different generations that participants represented. One participant commented that

- “I think it’s really easy to make assumptions about Colorado . . . You can’t just paint broad brush strokes about what needs are in our communities. And this has just so highlighted the different needs in our communities and the experts that we now know who we can talk to about various regions and various organizations . . . I’m so impressed with people in Colorado. It was so nice to be in this particular space, [and] having these conversations with a large group of people was so exciting.”

Beyond merely appreciating the connections they made during the program, participants were clear about their desire to stay in contact with one another afterward. When asked about their current communication habits with other CLHE participants, more than half of those who participated in the endline focus groups shared that they regularly texted, called, and met in person, mostly with those who belonged in the same regional group.

- “Han continuado [las relaciones con la gente de la misma región]. Sí, se han fortalecido. Y siento que nuestra región, todas tenemos el interés de seguir, [y] hemos estado hablando del cafecito al mes, o una cosa así, donde sigamos en contacto después [del programa]. Queremos llevar a cabo el proyecto de comunidad, y también queremos el poder seguir, [para] darnos ese tiempo para poder estar [juntos] y unirnos más.” *“The relationships with people (from the same region) have continued. Yes, they have strengthened. And I feel that our region, we all have an interest in continuing, (and) we have been talking about meeting for coffee once a month, or something like that, where we stay in contact after (the program). We want to carry out the community project, and we also want to be able to continue, (to) give ourselves that time to be able to be (together) and unite more.”*

However, it is important to note that there was also interest in maintaining relationships with other participants from across the state. Some participants had already circumvented the distance by creating online spaces where they could share resources with one another. Overall, participants agreed that they now had a rich network of people who they felt comfortable reaching out to for guidance, support, and resources related to their equity projects and pursuits. Even those who felt they did not form as many connections as possible expressed the desire to follow up with other CLHE participants in the near future.

The EAG agreed that meeting people from all over Colorado was a remarkable aspect of participating in the CLHE program. Their view of Colorado expanded as they learned more about other people’s communities and the equity work they are involved in. They also agreed that the connections they formed have been of both professional and personal value, with participants from at least one region even getting together for the holidays, while others continue to have active group chats. However, the EAG pointed out that although they talked with participants from other regions during the convenings, strengthening those relationships was much more challenging to coordinate outside of the convenings. Only some EAG participants collected email addresses or business cards from participants from other regions and shared that they felt no hesitation about reaching out to them if something came up.

Transformative Experience

During the endline focus group sessions, participants repeatedly referred to CLHE as an experience that changed their life. They made it clear that this was not an exaggeration and that they were in fact profoundly impacted by the program. This experience included discerning an increase in their self-efficacy, a newfound and invigorating desire to share with others what they learned, a commitment to implement changes in their household, and a greater capacity for empathy. We discuss these in greater detail below.

Participants credited their participation in CLHE with having helped them gain a strong sense of empowerment and hope not only about their capacity to be agents of change in their community but also about their capacity to advocate for themselves and improve their own lives. One participant stated that

- “Esa es la habilidad que aprendimos aquí, a distinguir y cómo abordar [el problema], cómo voy a poder llegar hasta ahí por pasos, cómo agarrar a las personas que me van a ayudar, cómo buscar los recursos . . . Aunque sea un poquito puedo apoyar, poner mi granito de arena para empezar a fomentar el cambio.” *“This is the skill that we learned here, to distinguish and how to approach (the problem), how I am going to be able to get there step by step, how to get a hold of the people who are going to help me, how to find the resources . . . Even if by only a little, I can support, do my bit to start advancing change.”*

Beyond feeling empowered and hopeful, participants expressed an intent to share what they learned through their participation in CLHE. When asked what skills or tools they felt they gained from CLHE, almost all participants in the endline focus group mentioned acquiring a rich vocabulary and profound awareness regarding issues of health equity as well as a repertoire of hands-on teaching exercises. These skills stood out because they facilitated participants’ ability to share information on and discuss the social determinants of health and other equity issues. Some of the spaces that participants listed as places where they were currently integrating these skills and tools or would like to in the future included their classrooms, youth groups, workplaces, and anywhere they found someone willing to listen. While there was not time to delve too deeply into each of these contexts, participants more thoroughly discussed some of the specific workplace initiatives in which they were engaging. These initiatives included evaluating the progress their organization was making toward equity and inclusion efforts, joining board discussions, encouraging other community members to do the same, using organizational funds to support diverse candidates running for elected positions, and building a pipeline of diverse candidates to enter leadership positions. For example, two participants shared the following perspectives:

- “I will be using what I’ve learned from my position at [place of employment] in several areas: for one, we need to make sure that what we do is more equitable, all the way around, and feasible for all oppressions, because what we’ve been doing in the past is not necessarily good for everybody. We’ve made steppingstones, but it’s not where it needs to be yet.”
- “My organization is a community-organizing group, and so we do a lot of organizing every day. But seeing people who are not cis white men of a certain age and status in positions of power is still not common. And so, building a bench . . . [and] leadership development . . . those two things are really instrumental in seeing systemic changes on a local level.”

Participants shared similar responses when asked about how they were applying what they learned in the program to their relationships with others. Everyone in the English-language focus group mentioned ways that they were showing up differently in their family, including a greater willingness to modify their parenting and/or grandparenting styles and to speak up and teach family members who were being offensive. The parents in this focus group agreed that it had been a tough realization that they had been unconsciously engaging in [horizontal oppression](#) and proliferating misogyny and double

standards in their households. Their responses reflected remorse, and they resolved to do better. One participant commented that

- “I’m braver to correct my mother . . . Yeah. That’s a space I’ve never entered [before], the oppressions that we have, but also being the oppressor, and then also the language that sometimes my mother uses, or my family uses, and stopping it instead of just, “Oh, that’s just how they are.” But really just control that . . . Trying to be able to control my environment and the community words that I don’t want to hear . . . Setting boundaries . . . Acknowledging the harm my daughter—I go back to a lot is acknowledging the parenting style I was doing, or the words that I’m doing to her as a young woman. Not knowing that beforehand because that’s how it was. That’s how it is . . . Or trying to protect her in a way that does not need to be protected.”

The responses shared by participants in the Spanish-language focus group regarding how their relationships with others changed after participating in CLHE were slightly different than those shared by participants in the English-language focus group. While most of these participants focused on how they now felt a greater capacity to empathize with others, especially with those who with very different experiences, one of them expressed how her language has changed, reflecting a new sense of empowerment in her relationship with her partner. Their responses show these different aspects of personal change:

- “Aquí aprendí . . . que tal vez yo no la sienta, pero puedo distinguir de otras personas menos privilegiadas que yo que sí están sufriendo. Ya tengo la respuesta del por qué las personas menos privilegiadas se comportan de cierta manera . . . Porque tienen que buscar el modo de sobrevivir.” *“Here I learned . . . that although I may not experience it, I can distinguish that other people less privileged than me are suffering. I have the answer to why less privileged people behave in a certain way . . . Because they have to find a way to survive.”*
- “El apoyo familiar [me ayudó a participar] . . . El que tenga una pareja que, que me deje... no me deje, sino que me apoye, porque también, fijese, lo que aprendimos de que, de nuestro lenguaje, eh, para nosotros era normal . . . decir “pedí permiso”, no, no, no, me apoya.” *“The family support helped me to participate . . . Having a partner that, who allows me... not allows me, instead, supports me, because also look at it, what we learned about our language, eh, it was normal to us . . . to say, ‘I asked for permission,’ no, no, no, he supports me.”*

The EAG agreed that this was a life-changing opportunity. By teaching participants the skills and tools to be active agents of change and to take ownership of what they want to see in their community, the program transformed the way they saw themselves. Those who had successful projects also expressed having the reassurance that they can take on and coordinate a huge project. Others commented on how just the sheer amount of knowledge they gained has boosted their self-efficacy.

The focus group discussions with the 2021 Cohort highlighted the extent that CLHE activities and events precipitated positive outcomes for participants. To summarize, at endline, participants valued the

development of their social network across Colorado, and they noted how they now had at their fingertips an expansive community of equity leaders and game changers with whom they were eager to stay connected. Participants also described being motivated and confident in their ability to take action to address biases reflected in their own behavior as well as in their workplaces, communities, and families.

Participant Reflections

The findings that emerged from the participant reflections submitted by the 2021 Cohort similarly highlighted the extent that CLHE activities and events were positively experienced and, furthermore, were associated with beneficial outcomes. Participants' reflections on the personal changes they underwent, their opinions on the usefulness of the program, their feelings about CLHE more generally, and their other reflections are discussed below.

Personal Change

One finding that emerged from the reflections was that many participants credited CLHE with helping them attain greater self-awareness. They explained that the content and activities helped them begin to heal past traumas, recognize and unlearn internalized oppression, think for themselves, acknowledge privileges they had benefitted from, and show themselves more compassion for behavior they engaged in or decisions they made in the past.

Although the topics addressed during CLHE events were heavy and sometimes emotionally challenging, many participants ultimately felt that their experiences were reflected in the program curriculum. They found this particularly moving and validating. Overall, a high number of reflections submitted by participants indicated that they were graduating from the program with a greater understanding of themselves and their personal story:

- “The CLHE program has taught me how to think for myself and to interrupt some of the internalized ideas I have developed through growing up.”
- “Participating in CLHE helped me stop blaming myself for the difficulties I experienced when I was poor.”
- *“Lo que he aprendido aquí me ha ayudado a validar mi experiencia y a darle nombre a tantas cosas a mi alrededor.” “What I have learned here has helped me validate my experience and give a name to so many things around me.”*

Other personal changes that participants attributed to CLHE were rooted in their attitudes, behaviors, and values. For instance, some participants commented that the program challenged them to consider new perspectives they had not had access to before, and as a result, they felt they had been able to check their own biases and practice being more open minded. Participants wrote the following:

- “I have learned so much about myself and my own biases. I have been able to self-reflect and be more open minded. I have learned different perspectives and languages.”

- “CLHE has helped me personally grow into a more open-minded person and increased my understanding of others’ sufferings and oppressions.”

Changes in participants’ attitudes, behaviors, and values were also expressed through their newfound goals and aspirations. Examples included recognizing the importance of and being motivated to advocate for their community, connect with others, and implement changes to how they show up in different spaces, such as their home and workplaces. Participants stated the following:

- “I’m wanting to be able to take all that I’m learning to help my community as a whole. I believe this time around also is going to help me grow as a community advocate/organizer . . . My goals are to take what I’m learning and grow as a woman/community member.”
- “One of my biggest takeaways is that I plan to run for public office due to CLHE. I always knew the systems perpetuated inequities but now have a much more in-depth understanding of how. Due to this understanding, I feel more confident that I know more of what needs to be fixed and [have] a deeper conviction that things can’t continue on the way they are.”

Program Usefulness

As discussed in the previous section, participants said they were implementing many changes in themselves, their families, and their workplaces as a result of their CLHE experience. Furthermore, they spoke about feeling more confident in their ability to talk to others about health equity. When asked about the usefulness of the program, participants offered overwhelmingly positive responses. First and foremost, they agreed that they learned a lot from the program. Some of the content that was particularly memorable to participants was learning about biases, the history of the United States, and various “-isms” (e.g., racism, classism, sexism, nationalism, and language oppression). The content provided them with the knowledge to not just name inequities but to understand the greater implications of those inequities. In addition, participants also gained the confidence to apply what they learned in the program to various aspects of their lives. Participants stated the following:

- “The program is giving me the skills to be able to talk about inequity and oppression in an informed way. I’m getting more confidence initiating and facilitating these conversations. I will be using my personal project outcomes and everything I’ve learned in my work as a trainer and group facilitator.”
- “Something another participant said has stuck with [me]: ‘I knew some of these things, these facts (like the wealthy getting tax breaks). But now I understand the *implications* of those things. It really means something more than just the fact.’”

Beyond the usefulness of the knowledge and tools instilled by the program, participants also found the opportunity to network tremendously rewarding. Similar to the findings that emerged in the focus group sessions, participants once again expressed gratitude for the opportunity to connect with other Coloradans. In their reflections, they mentioned benefitting from being exposed to diverse perspectives and hearing about the different advocacy work in which other communities were

engaging. In addition, participants learned from, supported, and developed numerous friendships across the program, but the friendships with those who shared similar backgrounds and experiences were particularly special, as these were the people with whom they were able to create safe spaces. Participants stated the following:

- “I enjoy the CLHE program because it has allowed me to meet so many wonderful people. A lot of people I met at our first convening . . . I have grown closer with and made friends with. The CLHE cohort has become like a family to me!”
- “This training is important because you get the opportunity to meet so many different people and gain different perspectives that would not be available in my home region.”

Transformative Power of CLHE

In their written reflections, participants described CLHE as life changing or eye opening. One participant reflected that CLHE gave them a new pair of glasses through which to view reality, a view attuned to issues of equity. Other participants commented:

- “CLHE has taught me to lose my blinders and take notice of the inequities our community is facing.”
- “Being in the CLHE program has made me aware of just how unaware I was of different equity issues such as classism and racism, frighteningly present in the U.S.”

Others also described the program as empowering, uplifting, and motivating. Some participants clarified that this was because they felt they had been given the tools to do something with the knowledge they gained and that they were hopeful for the future. One participant stated that:

- “In learning how the systems work, I have learned how we can work together to make the world more equitable and fair. Knowledge is power and the power to suppress facts is far more powerful, and so I feel like I was lied to my whole life about this country and what it really stands for. Now I am empowered and motivated to educate others and work towards uniting everyone to make this world one that our children deserve.”

Another aspect of CLHE that participants found memorable was the quality of the facilitation. They were grateful for the Transformative Alliances team, who they described as knowledgeable, creative, and exceptional role models who led by example. Moreover, participants felt that the facilitators made the content comprehensible and engaging, which in turn made the experience unforgettable. Two participants stated the following:

- “This program is amazing at breaking down the oppression and systematic exclusion that is prevalent in our institutions and culture. I really appreciate the amount of statistics and quantitative graphics used. They make it extremely easy to understand and internalize. I look forward to seeing how this program progresses!”

- “Agradezco la manera y estrategia en la que el contenido se ha compartido. Hay un término reciente: *racially literate*. Este término explica cómo para ser consciente de racismo y otras opresiones se necesita la mente y el corazón. La mente con información correcta (estadísticas, significados, etc.) y corazón: conectar estos términos con historias personales y ser consciente cómo estos “términos” impactan de manera real y objetiva a las personas oprimidas. CLHE ha logrado este objetivo con sus presentaciones, ejercicios, reflexiones y actividades. Estoy muy agradecida de ser parte de este programa.” *“I appreciate the way and strategy in which the content has been delivered. There is a recent term: racially literate. This term explains how being aware of racism and other oppressions requires the mind and the heart. The mind—with correct information (statistics, meanings, etc.)—and the heart—connecting these terms with personal stories and be aware of how these “terms” impact oppressed people in a real and objective way. CLHE has achieved this objective with its presentations, exercises, reflections, and activities. I am very grateful to be a part of this program.”*

The EAG agreed with these findings and added that while the depth of the facilitators’ knowledge was impressive, what was even more remarkable was the facilitators’ ability to teach. EAG participants were especially struck by the movement-based learning, as that was a unique experience for them. And although some of the learning activities forced them out of their comfort zone, they were effective and the end payoff was worth it.

Although the participant reflections were overwhelmingly positive, one participant expressed dissatisfaction with the competence of some of the regional leaders (e.g., the grantee point people). Notably, this was an outlier case and did not seem representative of common experiences.

- “Our regional leaders have not communicated very well with me (I don’t know about others) regarding logistics, homework, assignments, and other items we are responsible for. The HELS [Health Equity Learning Series] have been so disorganized and notifications about timing/dates and plans have not been timely. There is a lack of accountability and follow-through on the part of leadership that has made this training seem not as serious as I think it should be. It has impacted my personal experience negatively.”

Recommend to Others

A final theme that emerged in participants’ reflections was that many agreed that they would recommend CLHE to others, with some eager to do their part to bring the content to their community. Two participants stated the following:

- “The CLHE Program has been a true blessing . . . The information presented will help me help others and provide them with accurate information and resources. It will help make small changes in the world for a better tomorrow.”
- “I wish more community members had the same opportunity to engage with this content, especially [those that are] not directly impacted . . . or people who see themselves as allies, but struggle to connect deeply with oppressions and how to resist.”

To summarize, except in one case, participants' reflections were positive and highlighted that they felt CLHE was useful, of high quality, likely to inspire change, and, as a result, an experience they would recommend to others.

Analysis: Continuing Track Cohort

Focus Groups

The focus group discussions with the Continuing Track Cohort focused on participants' experience of the program, challenges and successes with their projects, and the additional learning and growth the Continuing Track inspired. Monolingual Spanish speakers did not participate in the endline focus groups for the Continuing Track Cohort, and therefore the analysis below cannot be generalized to the whole group.

Participant Experience of the Program

During the endline focus group discussions with the Continuing Track Cohort in May 2022, participants expressed profound satisfaction with the CLHE Continuing Track program, describing it as eye opening, relevant, and inspiring to personal growth. However, the program was also challenging for participants. Oppression and inequity were heavy topics, and consequently, participants also described the experience as emotional. This was especially true when difficult emotions were elicited because participants recognized some of their social identities reflected in the content as the oppressed. Other times, participants recognized themselves reflected in the content as the oppressor and had to reckon with the harmful actions in which they had previously (albeit unintentionally) engaged. Two participants stated the following:

- “I feel like I have a wide range of emotions. Sometimes it’s like heaviness or sadness or hopelessness because we’re discussing such a heavy oppressive system. And then other times it’s fun and light and energizing or firing you up to change the world. It’s all over the place, I feel like for me.”
- “I’ve left here angry about stupid things that I did. I’ve left here in tears because of things that I didn’t realize. So, there’s been a lot of emotions.”

Some participants shared that the time they were able to spend reflecting was incredibly important, whether during or after Continuing Track events and activities, because it gave them the opportunity to process the various emotions brought to the surface by the program curriculum. Many participants used this time to informally convene with those with whom they had formed close relationships and were able to create a safe space to ask remaining questions regarding the content. One tearful participant stated that

- “I’m a very sensitive person, and I magnify . . . things. And a lot of the conversations we’ve had here have been very deep for me and real intense. But like [another participant] said, at the end of the day, you get together with your friends and have a little fun and it lightens everything up, but it’s opened up a lot of me that really needed to be opened up.”

Unfortunately, not all participants had the opportunity to experience a sense of comradery and emotional catharsis. Some felt they did not have a support system. The Continuing Track program proved especially challenging for participants whose fellow regional members did not continue participating, as they did not feel they had access to the same level of emotional support as those whose regional groups remained more intact. They recommended that all participants who chose to participate in the Continuing Track be informed ahead of time that they would benefit the most if they had someone close with whom they could process the heaviness of the topics. Almost tearful, one participant stated that

- “I think it’s important with groups moving forward, you all have very close groups and have people to go to, but for me, I didn’t have that. So, it was really isolating. I’m gonna get emotional now, it was hard. So, I think if you’re doing this, you have to have somebody that you can have that debriefing with because it’s hard conversations and you got to have support.”

Project Plans

Participants had mixed experiences with the individual and group projects, and the reasons why are further elaborated in the section below. In summary, participants felt that expectations were unclear, that selecting and gauging the feasibility of a topic was challenging, and that the COVID-19 pandemic created logistical obstacles.

Several participants shared that they did not think the expectations for the projects were sufficiently communicated and that the projects felt disconnected from the rest of the program. This created some challenges, including when participants belatedly realized that they had chosen a project that was unattainable within the given time frame, when they were confused regarding which project to move forward with, and when they felt dissatisfied with the project they chose to pursue. Two participants stated that

- “When we were devising our projects, it wasn’t necessarily clear to me . . . that there was an expectation of follow through. It was more . . . to me, it was presented as what kind of ideas do you have around health equity more than anything . . . Had I known that the end goal was the evaluation point, . . . I wouldn’t have chosen what I chose. So I think making expectations clear when you’re applying for the program and while you’re in the program that we want to see movement here, we want to see [intended] outcomes [, would be helpful].”

- “I think the project for me was the biggest miss of this program. It just felt clunky or disconnected, so in the first convenings [the initial CLHE track], we had our personal projects that we presented and a group project. And then when we started the Continuing Track, we created a new project, or at least I did. And that piece never felt totally cohesive to me.”

In addition, some participants felt that those who came into the program with less prior knowledge were at a disadvantage when it came to picking a project topic. This is because as participants progressed in the program, their interests and understanding evolved, which for some meant that they were no longer as eager about the project they had originally designed. A few participants agreed that introducing the project component midway through the program, instead of at the beginning, could have helped this issue. One stated that

- “The learning curve, though, I think plays in there for people who don’t know as much about the equity and the social determinants, because at the beginning, when you’re picking a project, you have this much knowledge and it grows and grows and grows. And so there’s this arc that builds and you look back, you’re like, oh, well maybe that wasn’t what I wanted.”

COVID-19 was a roadblock that most participants mentioned as particularly challenging. Because of the virus, not only was scheduling a persistent obstacle, but participants were also limited in the activities they could pursue with their communities. Some participants felt that there was insufficient momentum to even get their projects off the ground until the program was nearly over. However, one participant made the astute observation that COVID-19 may have helped them solidify the topics they were learning about in the program, as it highlighted health inequities in real time:

- “COVID helped my project because the project was to educate clinics. So I continued with my personal project, but it was also part of my job. But then . . . people being food insecure and not being able to pay their rent because they weren’t working, really, at the clinic level, they were able to see what we were talking about for two years. Like, oh, it is important for people to get food. It’s important to address these needs because they’re not addressing their medical needs because they’re not able to pay their rent.”

Although a few participants felt that their individual and group projects were not as successful as they would have liked, participants recognized that there were other informal projects and pursuits they took on in both their personal and professional lives as a result of the Continuing Track that they were proud of. These included developing working relationships with programs in other communities across the state as well as developing a greater sense of competency in regard to community organizing and campaign running. One participant added that

- “I feel like I used skills that we learned to do other things. So it wasn’t a project that I conceived here or anything, but I set up a health equity learning day for our families at Head Start. And I wouldn’t have done that had I not come here.”

Learning and Growth

The extensive personal development that Continuing Track participants underwent and described during the focus group discussions was wide ranging. However, what much of their learning and growth had in common was that it indicated positive changes in their attitudes and behaviors. In addition, participants grew professionally, as they networked with one another and became informal intermediaries between their respective organizations.

Remarkably, almost all participants shared that they noticed positive changes in their attitudes and behaviors as a result of their participation in the program. Even participants who came with prior exposure to and experience with social justice and equity issues expressed that they grew significantly. Some examples of the personal growth participants reflected on included practicing humility, learning to take an adaptable approach when conducting outreach in different communities, and feeling empowered to introduce CLHE content and activities to their workplaces. Participants also felt a newfound appreciation for other people's struggles and a greater sense of hope that change can occur at the grassroots level. It is important to note that these positive changes were not only precipitated by the program's content and activities but also by the relationships participants developed with one another. Several participants acknowledged that they previously held assumptions of who was passionate about and participated in social justice efforts. The relationships that formed organically during the program proved these assumptions incorrect, a powerful experience that altered participants' willingness to engage with people from different backgrounds. Participants shared the following:

- “We were able to take a lot of the resources and a lot of what we learned back to our clinics and really show them why it's important to address health equity. And one of the biggest presentations we did, which was an ‘a-ha’ . . . the difference between equity versus equality. And people were just blown away by the differences and why it's important to understand that. So, a lot of what we learned, we were able to take back to our communities, but I don't think we would've had that if I hadn't continued with the second track.”
- “I'm less judgmental of people and give them more . . . I think it's grace, I don't know what the word is, but instead of being surprised that people don't understand something or believe something or think something the way that I feel . . . I'm more apt to have a conversation rather than just make a judgment.”
- “[The relationships built in the program] really made a difference on my internalized stuff and introspecting on myself and kind of unraveling the things that I grew up knowing maybe didn't understand or have a feel for it. And it just kind of rewound my life so that I could move forward with a clearer understanding and the ability to direct myself in a way that I didn't know was really possible, or that I could really question this or that . . . So that's how it made a really large impact for me.”

Along with the experience of forming relationships with people they may not have interacted with before, participants also had the opportunity to form partnerships between the organizations they

came from. For example, one participant explained how the Continuing Track allowed them to build great personal relationships with two participants from another region and with their respective programs; they were able to maintain their relationship even while they were changing jobs in different counties. One of those participants explained that

- “Both organizations did not have an existing relationship with their program. And their program is very important in the communities that we serve. So this program helped me develop that relationship with them and be able to work together, so both doing the same things and we brought it to our communities together like a team.”

Participant Reflections

As did the themes that emerged from the focus group discussions, participant reflections also revolved around their learning and growth as well as their experience with the program. These reflections primarily focused on the personal changes participants underwent and their thoughts on the usefulness of the program. Each of these topics is explored below.

Personal Changes

The reflections submitted by participants during the final Continuing Track convening made it clear that participating in the program inspired personal growth that helped improve their lives, both professionally and personally. Moreover, the reflections affirmed that this was a life-changing experience for a significant number of participants, who expressed wholehearted gratitude in their reflections. Participants were thankful for the program curriculum, for being continuously challenged, and for the facilitators, who were described as patient and warm. Taken together, this feedback created an environment that was unique and conducive to learning. Two participants wrote the following:

- “Quiero expresar mi agradecimiento por este programa especialmente a nuestras facilitadoras . . . por su paciencia de enseñar y de facilitar. Esta experiencia ha sido única para mí y mi familia, con el aprendizaje recibido. Muchos seremos los beneficiados.” *“I want to express my gratitude for this program especially to our facilitators . . . for their patience in teaching and facilitating. This experience has been unique for me and my family, with the learning received. Many of us will be the beneficiaries.”*
- “I can't express how much I have benefited from this program for the last 4 years . . . Thank you so much – Please continue to support this program and our communities. More people need this education!!!”

Many participants also expressed an increase in self-efficacy. In their reflections, they indicated a newfound sense of empowerment. Their reflections suggested not only a motivation to continue implementing what they had learned to make changes in their own lives but an eagerness to share what they had learned with their families and their communities. Participant reflections included the following:

- “The CLHE program is helping me grow because I have been empowered to create space for change. What I’ve learned in the CLHE program I can put to use in my home and community. Participating in CLHE motivates me to change my world one thing at a time.”
- “Pienso que he sido parte de un gran comienzo para empezar un cambio positivo e interrumpir injusticias.” *“I think that I have been part of a great beginning to start a positive change and interrupt injustices.”*

Program Usefulness

Each participant brought unique background knowledge, so there were some differences in what they took away from the program. Participants who were already familiar with social justice and equity reflected on how the CLHE experience taught them the importance of practicing humility and being open to questioning what they think they already know. Meanwhile, participants with less prior exposure learned about the root causes of different social issues, and as a result, they learned to practice more empathy.

- “The CLHE program has taught me that I still have a lot to learn when it comes to systems of oppression. When I first entered the program, I was sure that through all my training, education, and lived experience . . . I knew everything there was to know as it related to power, privilege, and oppression. Participating in CLHE motivates me to continue learning and growing. There are so many things I didn’t know and continue to learn more about every day.”
- “When I started, I didn’t understand how much different cultures and people were oppressed . . . I have worked with people and gotten them resources for over 30 years, but now I understand why people are stuck in their positions. I have grown to be a better person and am now able to serve our community without judgment of biases.”

Participants also shared that the friendships made through the CLHE program were incredibly valuable, and some participants mentioned that they hoped to maintain those connections. Participants shared that even when close friendships did not necessarily blossom, they still learned a lot from their peers. Some were very honest and confessed that as a result of participating in CLHE, they had the opportunity to interact with people from backgrounds they would not normally choose to interact with, which taught them to question their own biases and assumptions.

Discussion

To reiterate, the qualitative data collected throughout the course of CLHE for both the 2021 Cohort and the Continuing Track Cohort included observations, focus group transcripts, and participant reflections. By looking at the themes that emerged from each of these data sources, we are able to state that for most participants in each cohort, the program proved to be an overwhelmingly positive

and fruitful experience and that this was the case for a wide variety of reasons and across diverse participant backgrounds. Below we summarize the primary findings of this analysis.

The CLHE program activities and events changed participants' views of themselves and their relationships to systems of oppression. One key finding that emerged from the focus groups and participant reflections—and that was confirmed by those who attended the EAG sessions—was that many participants exited the program with a distinct sense of empowerment. They felt confident about their ability to not only name systems of oppression they themselves faced but also to recognize the privileges they held and, even more importantly, how to use this new view of the world to stand up for themselves and others.

CLHE activities and events developed participants' motivation and self-efficacy to take action to address inequities in general and health inequities in particular in their local communities. Beyond feeling self-empowered, participants made it clear that they wanted to stay involved in their community. One of the transformative personal changes that participants discussed was how they developed hope that change is possible. For many, this hope translated into action by beginning to address issues of equity within their own household or workplaces.

The CLHE program activities and events developed participants' leadership skills related to communication, grassroots organization, meeting facilitation, and public speaking. Toward the end of the program, there was an observable change in how comfortable participants appeared when talking about issues of equity. The interactive CLHE activities and events offered participants the valuable experience of applying what they were learning in a safe environment. In the focus groups, several participants mentioned how this experience gave them the confidence to begin applying what they learned through CLHE at their workplaces. Others used what they learned to continue working on their individual and group projects in their community. In addition to acquiring knowledge and information, participants also gained soft skills critical to good leadership, such as self-awareness and empathy.

CLHE activities and events created a social network through which participants could share information and discuss issues related to equity and the social determinants of health with others. The sense of comradery observed between participants at the convenings extended beyond mere politeness. In both the focus groups and submitted reflections, participants spoke sincerely about the meaningful connections they developed. Reflecting on the lifelong friendships they developed and on the new partners in thought with whom they could share resources and ideas, many agreed that they developed a rich social network they felt comfortable reaching out to for support.

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