

LiveWell Colorado: Making Connections, Creating Health

Colorado brings to mind visions of fit men and women hiking giant peaks, zipping down ski trails, and mountain biking through verdant forests. In fact, the state is the “leanest” in the nation with the lowest rate of obesity of all 50 statesⁱ. However, obesity rates in Colorado are high, and continue to rise. Since 1997, the obesity rate has increased 65 percent and today, 56 percent of Colorado residents are overweight or obeseⁱⁱ. In Colorado, low income communities and communities of color are disproportionately burdened by the obesity epidemic. Numerous communities throughout the state don’t have easy access to physical activity due to geography, economics, and culture. Without access to parks and playgrounds, safe places to bike or pedestrian walkways, these numbers will continue to rise. Similarly, while Colorado farmers produce significant crops of organic fruits, vegetables and grains, these healthy foods often don’t make it into small neighborhood stores or schools.

In 2006, three organizations joined forces to halt the rising obesity rate in Colorado. Kaiser Permanente, The Colorado Health Foundation, and the state Department of Public Health and Environment launched LiveWell Colorado (LWC) to lead and coordinate statewide health improvement efforts. They envisioned collaboration with efficient leadership, grantmaking abilities, and a unique approach to promoting health. Along the way, the groups, who have recently been joined by the Kresge Foundation, are learning the challenges and the promise of knitting together local community-based initiatives into a statewide endeavor that seeks to change policy and make health a reality in every corner of the state.

“We are taking a new approach with this investment of dollars and resources. If it works—and we believe the chances of success are excellent—the pay-off will be an improvement in the health of our community that is currently unimaginable.”—Ned Calonge, Chief Medical Officer, Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment

LiveWell’s History

Although LiveWell Colorado is a young organization, its founding partners have a significant history of funding communities to create healthier environments. With a grant from the Centers for Disease Control in 2001, Colorado’s Department of Public Health started the Colorado Physical Activity and Nutrition Program (COPAN), created a statewide plan to reduce obesity, and made grants to communities to begin implementation. In 2003, Colorado received a *Steps to Healthier US* grant and provided four counties with funding and technical assistance to improve health. On a parallel track, Kaiser Permanente’s *Thriving Communities* program funded 11 Denver/metro communities in 2004 to promote healthy eating and active living. In 2006, building on the lessons learned from all of these initiatives, COPAN funded an additional seven communities outside of Denver to create plans to fight obesity.

Recognizing the parallel nature of their independent efforts, leaders from Kaiser, COPAN, the Colorado Health Foundation and the Kresge Foundation, decided to coordinate their obesity-prevention initiatives throughout the state to maximize their collective impact. By

pooling resources, they aimed to reduce fragmentation in grantmaking and minimize duplication in applications, evaluations, provision of technical assistance, and site visits. Through collaboration, they could also go beyond grantmaking to leverage policy and environmental change from the local level to the state arena. In 2007, they created LiveWell Colorado to “inspire and advance policy, environmental, and lifestyle changes that promote health.” To help realize this vision, Kaiser Permanente committed \$16 million over five years to LiveWell, the Colorado Health Foundation pledged \$17 million over three years, and the Kresge Foundation pledged \$1 million total over three years.

LiveWell Colorado built upon its predecessor programs and national research by focusing on community environments and policy change. LWC’s approach and its grantmaking emphasize community-driven efforts that focuses on programs and policies that promote healthy eating and physical activity in schools, worksites and community settings. LiveWell Colorado also realizes that to make change, it must commit to its grantees for the long term – with plans to support communities beyond the usual one to three year grant cycle.

“LiveWell wants to elevate the statewide conversation about what works and reduce inequities around healthy eating and active living. We’re trying to be efficient with finite resources.” -Corina Lindley, Community Health Initiative Manager, Kaiser Permanente

Synergy & Collaboration

“Working together, our impact will be greater than what we can accomplish by ourselves in traditional silos. We have to be coordinated or we won’t make a difference.” Rachel Oys, Transition Consultant, LiveWell Colorado

From the start, these organizations believed that a coordinated, statewide effort was the most effective way to create health in Colorado. They understood converging their strengths and resources would make their united efforts more successful than their individual ones. Staff from each organization built trust and credibility by sharing responsibility from the beginning, “over-communicating”, ensuring transparency in decision-making, and the division of roles and responsibilities. To have a successful organization, they knew each partner needed to “leave their logos at the door” and so their commitment went beyond just coordinating and actually led to the creation of LiveWell Colorado as a stand-alone organization.

The decision to become a nonprofit was difficult, but the partners navigated the change well. The transition to one program went smoothly and the strategic planning process resulted in a cohesive set of goals and principles. The completion of LiveWell’s five-year strategic plan—a nine-month effort—had input from more than 800 organizations and individuals. The Transition Team – the precursor to the Board of Directors—wanted to be sure LWC’s goals and activities reflected the state residents needs and that they learned from the communities that had been addressing obesity on the local level under previous grantmaking programs. LiveWell’s leaders believed this planning and solicitation of input would put the organization on solid footing as it grows. The result is *Fostering Healthy People and Places: The Power of All of Us*, a plan that will guide statewide policy, programs and environmental changes to encourage healthy eating and active living. Most recently, a CEO was chosen and the transition team has phased out clearing the way for their appointed Board of Directors to take the organization’s reigns.

LiveWell's Vision:

All Coloradoans enjoy a lifestyle that includes healthy eating and active living. The state's tradition of health and wellness is fully embraced by its residents.

LiveWell's Mission:

LiveWell Colorado's mission is to inspire and advance policy, environmental, and lifestyle changes that promote health through the prevention and reduction of obesity.

LiveWell's Goals:

- *Advance a policy strategy with stakeholders*
- *Reduce health disparities related to nutrition, physical activity, and obesity*
- *Build leadership, capacity and synergy among stakeholders*
- *Reach every Coloradoan through a media campaign that inspires wellness*
- *Maximize investments in Colorado communities*
- *Effect change by ensuring impact and accountability*

Meeting Community Needs

"LiveWell Colorado has done a great job in making sure we don't feel like we're alone and doing this work in a vacuum." –Virginia Clark, Obesity Prevention Coordinator, Poudre Valley Health System

The LiveWell Colorado team recognizes that local programs must be supported, connected and coordinated in order for the state effort to be successful. Simultaneously, communities need freedom to create programming that meets the needs of their residents. To get each community grounded, LiveWell Colorado requires grantees to create broad-based coalitions that write community action plans to address barriers to healthy eating and active living in their communities.

The resulting plans can differ significantly. In Prowers County, a rural, low-income community near the Oklahoma panhandle, the local coalition identified the lack of a bike shop as an obstacle to making recreation more accessible and is writing a business plan to create a community-run bike repair shop. Meanwhile, in Commerce City, an industrial area near Denver, residents have identified a busy street corridor where changes to the streetscape could make it safer for bikers and pedestrians. In Fort Collins, the action plan called for "makeovers" of snack bars in recreation centers to include more healthy foods.

These efforts are connected by an intentional and strategic focus on improving physical and social environments that promote health. And by reaching throughout the state into diverse communities, LiveWell Colorado hopes to reduce health disparities by addressing the barriers faced by groups who suffer from poor health in disproportionate numbers.

LiveWell Colorado also supports grantees with technical assistance and networking opportunities to promote efficient information sharing. Community leaders from across the state convene four times a year to learn from each other, brainstorm, and provide input to the LiveWell Colorado staff. Grantees frequently call on each other for advice and input. For example, when the LWC project in Fort Collins started a community garden, they

received inquiries from other programs around the state. Similarly, other groups have become the experts on Health Impact Assessments or worksite wellness efforts.

Creating State Policy

“LiveWell Colorado is not a demonstration project. This is a long-term, concerted and intentional effort to take on the biggest threat to health in Colorado.”—Anne Warhover, President, The Colorado Health Foundation

LiveWell Colorado’s community grantmaking program has been the primary focus since its inception. The founding organizations have helped communities across Colorado start programs to encourage healthy eating and active living. Now, one of LWC’s primary goals is to create statewide policy that promotes this behavior. LiveWell Colorado staff recognizes the opportunity to take the lessons learned from communities and harness the energy of local leaders to ensure state policy promotes health and supports local efforts.

LWC is building on a strong foundation based on years of local grantmaking. For example, in Durango, Colorado, the LiveWell La Plata project facilitated a farm-to-school program where 11 area farms now supply local produce to schools most days of the week. The effort met the needs of the school district that was seeking to improve healthy choices and the desires of farmers to sell directly to schools. Durango’s success could serve as a model for a statewide push to improve school nutrition policies. However, whether and how local success translates to statewide improvements in physical activity and healthy eating remains largely untested.

Media and Communications Strategy

Another major strategic goal for LiveWell Colorado is to reach every Coloradoan through a media campaign focused on wellness. Because Colorado is known to its residents as the healthiest state in the nation—and has been praised by outsiders for that achievement—many people don’t see obesity as a problem. Local leaders are enthusiastic about the upcoming media campaign. They are hoping it drives support to their efforts.

Some communities have already seen a change in attitudes due to the presence of a LiveWell Colorado project. In Prowers County, when the LiveWell coordinator first moved to the area, he walked or biked to work. Neighborhood residents frequently pulled over their cars to offer him a ride, thinking his car had broken down. Today, he says, as a result of the LiveWell Prowers coalition and the heightened focus on physical activity, he sees more people out walking and no one is asking if he wants a ride.

ⁱ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System Survey Data. Atlanta, Georgia: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008.

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