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Strategic Plan

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Introduction
Caring for Denver Foundation operates as a 501(c)3 foundation and is publicly funded by City sales tax revenue. Our goal is to provide grants that invest in the strategies the community has determined most important and most effective at reducing substance misuse challenges and promoting positive mental health. As a Foundation, our role is to be good stewards, listeners, and supporters of organizations and agencies in their direct service – not to do the work ourselves.

Our work is guided by our founding Ordinance and the Denver community, with oversight from 13 Board members appointed by the Mayor, District Attorney, and City Council. This strategic plan outlines our approach to this work:

Section 1 outlines our Organizational Strategy. This includes our strategic impact goal and the organizational goals and objectives we have determined most critical for building a sustainable and thriving organization.

Section 2 focuses on our Funding Priorities Strategy. It describes our four funding priorities and the input we’ve received to date from our ongoing collaborative work with the community to support successful funding.
Section 3 provides an overview of our Learning and Evaluation Strategy. It describes our approach for ensuring we are holding ourselves and our grantees accountable to using learning and adaptation for impact.

This plan will be updated by the staff and the Board no less than every three years and will continue to include public input as required by our founding Ordinance.

This strategic plan is a living document. To assist the Board and staff in moving our strategic plan forward, we are developing a corresponding work plan to track progress on key activities. This work plan will align with our structured organizational learning activities (see pg. 29). This will ensure regular review of plan goals by staff and Board to guide the work of the Foundation as well as to document updates that reflect our progress and insights along the way.
Mission
To address Denver’s mental health and substance misuse needs by growing community-informed solutions, dismantling stigma, and turning the community’s desire to help into action.

Vision
A vibrant Denver where all communities are strengthened by the mental health and substance misuse support they need.

Values
We are committed to funding and supporting innovative efforts that move us towards equity and outcomes where race, ethnicity, disability, immigration status, and identity can no longer be used to predict life outcomes. Our ongoing efforts must elevate the voices of those impacted and repair historical trauma and oppression. Our values are:

**RESPECT. ALWAYS.**
We fiercely embrace inclusion and diversity, and strive to be representative, culturally responsive, and linguistically appropriate in all that we do.

**BE COURAGEOUS IN ACTION.**
We champion candid, open-minded reflection and are thoughtful and bold in the action we take.

**MEET PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE.**
We see and support all people and communities for their strengths and inherent value.

**FOCUS ON IMPACT FOR COMMUNITIES.**
We center all of our work on outcomes that always put Denverites, and their potential, first.

**ADVOCATE OUT LOUD.**
We courageously share our stories, engage our communities, and demonstrate how mental health and substance misuse affects us all.

**INVITE PARTNERSHIP.**
We are partners with the grantees, communities, and individuals with whom we collaborate and serve, recognizing all are essential to identifying, defining, and deciding what they need.
We Embrace Participatory Philanthropy.

We practice a participatory philanthropy approach to help reduce inequities and ensure our actions are driven with and by the communities impacted by our funding. This means we prioritize collaboration with grantees and the community throughout our grantmaking process.

Participatory philanthropy is increasingly recognized by foundations as an important practice for building open and authentic community relationships in order to see deeper impact. Moreover, practitioners report it leads to more effective philanthropic decisions and outcomes. We recognize a collaborative process requires extra time and a willingness to adapt and change. We believe it’s worth it.

Our initial, and continuing, work with community members is ensuring we move beyond reports and recommendations into meaningful action—highlighting from community perspectives what needs to be done now, what success will look like, and what the Foundation should look for when making funding decisions to ensure the greatest possible impact.

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We are a Learning Organization.

We are working collectively, internally and with our external community partners, to build capacity around addressing substance misuse and poor mental health in Denver. We prioritize learning in order to build our skills for creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge that can help us continually improve our approach.

Why is this important? Because effectively addressing mental health and substance misuse is an uncertain and complex challenge with no one right or consistent answer. Learning allows us to use our real experiences and generated knowledge to continually improve our approach to investment.

Simply monitoring our progress on intended strategies isn’t enough. We are committed to regularly asking questions, reflecting on our experiences and outcomes, and adapting our approaches based on insight to improve our chances of real and lasting impact.

Key conditions for organizational learning and adaptability include: 1) Developing a supportive learning environment; 2) Implementing structured learning processes; and 3) Leadership that promotes and reinforces learning culture.⁵

We are committed to implementing these conditions and look forward to learning driving improvements in our approach.

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The Caring for Denver Board met to identify mission, vision, and values in October 2019, following the execution of our contract with the City and County of Denver. During this time, we finalized staffing for the organization and began working with the Denver community to determine our funding priorities as required by our founding Ordinance.

The Ordinance created our initial frame for funding, highlighting mental health services and treatment for children and adults; suicide prevention; addressing opioid and substance misuse needs; and facilities and programs. This also included programs for co-responders, training of first responders, and supports to reduce homelessness, improve long term recovery, and reduce the use of jails and emergency rooms.

Using this direction from the ordinance, insights from the Road To Wellness Framework, and an additional thorough review of publicly available needs assessments, survey data, and reports, we built an informed understanding of Denver's mental health and substance misuse needs.

We engaged more than 1,600 Denver residents to vet what we found, clarify language and concepts from their real world experiences, prioritize where we...
as a Foundation should begin our work, and help us define success for funding.

This feedback was used to create our Strategic Funding Priorities document, which was approved by the Board and submitted to the Denver Department of Public Health and Environment on January 24, 2020, and shared with the public shortly after.

Our processes and procedures to release and monitor funding were developed and formally deployed during this time (November 2019-March 2020) with a call for proposals for our first funding priority released in April 2020.

We have released and will continue to release funds generally on a 3-4 month cycle to ensure all funding areas are opened and funded annually.

Internally, we also began implementing strategic and emergent learning practices in October 2019 to build our framework for the Foundation's culture and operations. Over the past year we have continued to gather insights and feedback from the Denver community, partners at the City and County of Denver, the Board of Directors, and our staff to create an overarching direction for the organization.

We will continue to refine our strategic plan through what we learn to ensure we live our values and fulfill our mission.
Section 1
Organizational Strategy
We Support a Continuum of Solutions.

In our continuing work with the community over the last year, we recognize common desires for change around Denver’s challenges with mental health and substance misuse.

While each funding area has its own unique theory of investment and desired outcomes, we continue to hear the community emphasize across funding areas that these issues:

1) Do not discriminate in who they impact (all are vulnerable and can be at risk);
2) Are not linear in their progress nor in their solution (these are often long-term and iterating pathways); and
3) Are not issues that can be eliminated with a one size fits all solution (journeys look different for everyone).

With this feedback in mind, we developed an overarching impact goal for Caring For Denver Foundation efforts. This impact statement guides our organizational strategic priorities, detailed on the following pages.

IMPACT GOAL

Agencies and organizations are funded to implement successful programs and interventions that increase Denver residents’ ability to seek and use supports, to find quality care that “fits” their needs, and to stay connected to resources over time that match their changing needs in order to reduce substance misuse, and its negative effects, and promote better mental health for all members of the Denver community.
Vision
By 2023, we are seen as an important partner for supporting community solutions and voice. Diverse community organizations and members see value in partnering with us. Grantees and community members trust the Foundation and want to continue working with us.

How we will get there (objectives):

1. Create linkages and leverage connections with and among communities, organizations, and systems to help mobilize community ideas, information, and resources.

2. Ensure community members involved in and impacted by our funding areas play a meaningful role in directing the use of Caring for Denver funds.

3. Explore and invest in what organizations need to be successful in carrying out community authored and driven work.

4. Support grantees in being the leaders and drivers of their grant implementation.
Vision
By 2023, the Foundation is implementing practices and procedures that promote consistency, and reliability. Awareness of the Foundation has increased across Denver communities. The Foundation is building its reputation as a credible and valuable resource. Staff and Board are motivated by their work, are continually learning and growing in their roles, and are regularly informing refinements that improve the Foundation’s infrastructure.

Establish Organizational Integrity and Stewardship

How we will get there (objectives):

1. Prioritize reliability and consistency in our operational process and procedures (grant application, grant management) for applicants, grantees, and staff.
2. Monitor and meet contractual agreements, audit findings, and conflict of interest requirements.
3. Build relationships and connections with key stakeholders to strengthen reputation and credibility.
4. Strategically communicate the Foundation’s mission and progress to increase community awareness.
5. Retain and leverage board and staff expertise.
6. Train and engage staff in emergent learning practices.
7. Provide opportunities to understand, implement, and improve roles through learning.
Vision
By 2023, the Foundation demonstrates progress in funding and promoting work that encourages and/or increases equitable practices in the field as a result of our internal work. We are supporting technical assistance strategies for community-based organizations to increase capacity within community and improve grant impact.

Promote Equity

How we will get there (objectives):

1. Work to identify, with community partner input, internal equity concepts and opportunities to promote equitable practice and progress within the Foundation.

2. Connect, build rapport, fund, and steward partnerships with organizations that are addressing mental health/substance misuse with an equity lens.

3. Develop, utilize, and evaluate equity-based practices for grant review and grant management.

4. Invest in capacity building/technical assistance to further support organizations doing the work in community.
Vision
By 2023, learnings are readily and regularly available to help stakeholders and communities understand the value and impact of the work being supported by the Foundation. Information and insights from the Foundation and its grantees are being used by others to drive better practices and policies within the City and beyond.

Demonstrate Meaningful Action & Learning

How we will get there (objectives):

1. Communicate to Denver audiences who and what is being funded, and its intended and actual impact on substance misuse and/or mental health issues in Denver.

2. Track internal Foundation progress, learning, and adaptation with respect to the strategic plan. Share key insights to support learning and transparency.

3. Contribute to and/or lead community conversations around learning and impact to influence future funding, programs, operations, and policy.

4. Partner with the Denver Department of Public Health to share key learning and best practices that can inform and improve work related to the Road to Wellness Framework.
In the fall of 2019, we prioritized connecting with the Denver community to gather perspectives and insights on what our funding priorities should be. We held outreach events, in-person, over the phone, and online (in English and Spanish), leading to engagement of 1,600 residents and trusted community leaders. They helped us see what the literature and metrics could not—an understanding of how mental health and substance abuse shows up in their lives.

We cross-referenced this community input with the City’s Road to Wellness framework, and collected Board input to develop our Strategic Funding Priorities document, which was submitted to DDPHE for review and input on January 24, 2020. This document was then shared with the City Council and the public for additional feedback in February.

The sum of this knowledge, experience, and collaboration were critical to identifying our funding priorities:

1) Alternatives to Jail;
2) Community-Centered Solutions
3) Youth (0-26); and
4) Care Provision.

We will continue to engage community members, field experts, the City, and the Board of Directors to refine the vision for these investments over time. Each of the funding priorities is described in more detail on pages 19-26.
Goal: Increased supports, connections, practices, and opportunities to redirect people experiencing mental health and substance misuse away from and out of the criminal justice system.

What is needed?
Increased diversion opportunities. Far too many people with mental illnesses are in jails and prisons. We need improved crisis response options and more opportunities at different points in the justice system where jail time is reduced or avoided, and more individuals linked to comprehensive community-based services and treatment.

More emphasis on and access to services. More supports that follow someone across programs, and institutions while in, and after they leave, the justice system. Access to peer support services to assist individuals in making decisions that promote their recovery.

Better connected systems for justice, health, and housing. Even though the same individual touches all of these systems, the data, policies, funding, and decision-making is fragmented. We need better processes for referrals, transition planning, and release of information to better support individuals as they transition into the community.
What would success look like?

- Reduced entry into the incarceration system
- Reduced recidivism
- Increased community-based referrals and supports when returning to the community

Recommended project characteristics to seek for the greatest potential impact

Meet people where they are
The justice system operates 24/7. Resources need to be convenient and accessible at times and places that match.

Take a systems approach
Help improve the current justice system by identifying and filling gaps while reducing duplicative services. Fund innovative ideas and solutions that can strengthen the system response as part of this approach.

Look for wellness over crisis
Look for interventions that recognize and support a strengths-based and person-centered approach in its model and language. Justice supports aren’t just about what happens in the time of crisis. Progress towards wellness and maintaining wellness should be supported.

Address social determinants
Look for programs that provide supports that are known to correlate with reduced justice involvement. Housing stability, employment, social connections, etc. ensure people have the resources and supports they need to avoid justice involvement. This includes peer-driven interventions and positive community-based engagement and connections.

What would success look like?

- Reduced entry into the incarceration system
- Reduced recidivism
- Increased community-based referrals and supports when returning to the community
Priority 2: Community-Centered Solutions

Goal: Use community knowledge, strengths, and resources to foster local connectedness and support.

What is needed?
Increase access to local care support. Transportation, wait times, and traditional work hours keep people from getting the support they need when they need it. Supports need to show up in places and spaces that communities already know, visit, and trust.

Promote and utilize community assets. There aren’t enough responses to mental health and substance misuse designed by and for the community. To meet people where they are, we must partner with communities and support efforts that are already working as well as new, innovative, and nontraditional solutions.

Increase trusted community. There’s a strong link between isolation and mental health and substance misuse. We need to understand and address what communities are going through by giving them space, language, mentoring, and peer opportunities to support each other.
What would success look like?

• Greater public visibility around mental health and substance misuse that reduces stigma and/or increases understanding and supportive actions by community members
• Increased connections to and use of social networks and relationships that reduce isolation
• Increased use of supports meeting people where they are that address mental health and/or substance misuse needs in community

Recommended project characteristics to seek for the greatest potential impact

**Sustainable**
Look for deep roots in community, with little to no navigation required, where thoughts for continuing the work are included, and designed or led by trusted community organizations. Ensure the work meets gaps or needs, and the intervention facilitates change (not just about awareness or expression).

**Culturally relevant**
Work prioritizes culturally responsive language and action, leaders are culturally matched with those impacted, addresses issues the community identified, those impacted are included in building, implementing, and/or assessing the project.

**Meaningful and focused**
Intervenes in ways we know works (e.g., peers, mentors) or is an innovative path or framework that is clear about how the actions will lead to impact, and mental health and/or substance misuse is the primary focus (not added on).

**Trauma informed**
The intervention understands, and addresses, identifying when more help is needed and ensuring that help is put in place.

**Partnership aware**
Is connected to what others are doing, has relationships (when appropriate) to deepen or broaden the work.

**COVID-19 responsive**
The organization has thought about its contingency plan and will be able to adapt the work to the changing circumstances due to COVID-19.

**Realistic**
Plans are doable, recognize the realities of building structure and logistics.
Goal: Better address and support mental health and substance misuse and create more connections for our youth.

What is needed?
Address mental health and substance misuse issues early. Right now, prevention resources are limited. By creating more opportunities that tackle problems at the source, youth are more likely to avoid downstream problems later in life, like justice involvement.

Improve resilience to life stresses and pressures. Unsurprisingly, today’s youth face a lot of life pressures and stresses. For many, that leads to anxiety and depression, and for some, more severe mental health concerns. This can impact success at school, or lead to negative coping strategies like substance misuse, self harm, and involvement in criminal behaviors.

Increase awareness of and participation in well-being and help seeking, particularly for youth allies. Parents, caregivers, schools, and others are critical allies for Denver’s youth. We must help these allies better recognize, address, and talk about mental health and stress—just like we do with physical health.
Recommended project characteristics to seek for the greatest potential impact

To Be Determined
Community review is scheduled for January 2021.

What would success look like?

- Reduced harm to self and others through addressing trauma, mental health, and substance misuse
- Increased ability to demonstrate healthy resilience for coping with challenges and stresses in life
- Increased awareness and involvement by family and allies in ways that help youth address trauma, mental health, and substance misuse
- Improved mental health and reduced substance misuse for youth
Goal: More people in Denver have access to the mental health and substance misuse care at the right time, and the supports to navigate care available.

What is needed?
Provide more people access to care. And care that “fits.” From first responders to libraries, we need more care providers. And we need more care providers that understand the unique needs of different cultures and communities.

Ensure care providers have what they need to provide high quality care. Providers and care givers need supports and training to be more effective in their role and to better connect with and meet the needs of people seeking care. More resources are also needed to support self-care and care for others when the system doesn’t.

Improve entry and transition connections for care. Quality care starts at the first point of connection. But since service information is often outdated or changes rapidly, people get frustrated and tend to give up on seeking care. Better support through transitions and coordination across providers is needed so people can easily get continuous care.
What would success look like?

- To Be Determined: community interview input scheduled for December 2020 / January 2021

Recommended project characteristics to seek for the greatest potential impact

**To Be Determined**
Community review scheduled for February / March 2021.
Section 3
Learning & Evaluation
Strategy
Grounded in Learning

We have developed a learning and evaluation infrastructure for implementing the strategic plan. This infrastructure is the basis for the development of the work plan and related implementation materials, including:

1) Documentation of success indicators and intended implementation timelines with respect to meeting the strategic plan objectives;

2) The structure for regular staff assessment of progress on identified objectives and intended work; and

3) Documentation of strategic adaptation of intended work based on progress and learnings to support real-time, strategic improvements throughout the year.

This section provides context on the learning we do both internally, as an organization, and externally, in partnership with our grantees.
Organizational Evaluation & Learning

The organization has chosen an emergent learning cycle model to support staff in implementing, adjusting, and improving efforts based on the strategic plan. The organizational impact statement and the goals and objectives of the strategic plan are the framework for our staff learning cycles.

The learning cycle creates dedicated space and the tools necessary to:

1) Coordinate and synchronize work at the team and organizational level;
2) Routinely identify goals and targets for the work;
3) Document progress and barriers to progress for the organization; and
4) Support decision-making and future action-taking that are evidence-informed.

These activities support the Foundation in ensuring its strategic plan is a living document, telling its story of progress as well as identifying actions for improving its strategy and operations in real-time and moving forward.

Three primary activities comprise the learning cycle. A reflective session is used annually to develop the upcoming year’s operational work plan, defining organization-level target goals, implementation timelines, and staff accountabilities. Monthly and quarterly updates are then used to record progress and accomplishments with respect to goals, challenges and learning insights, and adaptations needed throughout the course of the year.
Grantmaking Evaluation & Learning

The Foundation’s approach to evaluation is being designed to ensure the following three principles guide the process:

**WE ARE COMMUNITY-FOCUSED.**

For each funding area, we use insights from the Denver community to identify the outcomes and impacts desired by community members. These funding frames drive the overall evaluative processes for the Foundation and its funding areas.

**WE ARE EQUITY-DRIVEN.**

We work with grantees to develop an individualized evaluation frame that considers their funding objectives, hypotheses of change, their interests and needs for monitoring and assessing their own work, and their capacity for evaluation.

**WE FOSTER MEANINGFUL IMPACT.**

Grantees are asked to address, measure, and report on one or more impacts identified by community members and included in the funding area call for proposals. Additionally, grantees are asked to participate in learning activities with the Foundation to support understanding and improvements for grantees and for future grantmaking efforts.
Evaluation Touchpoints

Grantee Evaluation Frames and Individualized Performance Measures

Each grantee organization develops an internal, individualized evaluation framework for their grant that strives to utilize their current data collection, analysis, and reporting structures and ensure evaluation activities are useful for understanding and improving efforts during the grant cycle. These frameworks identify tailored measures of their activities and outcomes for the grant along with individualized timelines and reporting mechanisms.

Grantees also identify how collected data will be used internally for learning and improving their work. Although this process is individualized, grantees are required to choose and implement an outcome measure related to at least one community-identified success indicator documented in the funding area’s call for proposals.

Shared Performance Measures and Activities

In addition to grantee-driven evaluation, the Foundation asks grantees to participate in two structured Foundation-driven evaluation and learning activities:

**THREE TO SIX MONTH LEARNING CHECK-INS**

These check-ins with grantees explore:

- Progress
- Barriers and facilitators to progress
- Insights into how to improve grant efforts

The check-in is adapted from an emergent learning tool named the After Action Review, which encourages dialogue related to anticipated successes and actual observations of progress to identify opportunities for adaptation and help to improve results.

**END OF GRANT YEAR PROGRESS REPORT**

All grantees are asked to complete a report to summarize the work to-date.

This includes standardized measures across grantees and funding areas with respect to:

- Demographic and geographic reach
- Service to populations more likely impacted
- Milestones achieved
- Barriers and facilitators to progress
- Grantee-identified most significant changes occurring through the work

These questions will help to evaluate reach and equity in funded work, provide narratives related to impact, and support longer term, aggregate analysis of progress for funding efforts.
EVALUATION & LEARNING STRATEGY

Interpreting and Sharing Results

Information collected from grantees will be reviewed, summarized, and interpreted with the help of involved/impacted community members and organizations. Results will identify areas of strength and progress as well as challenges and opportunities.

We are also exploring ways to bring grantee cohorts together to share progress and learnings as a way to promote collaboration and reduce siloed efforts in the community. Though the COVID-19 pandemic has delayed this effort, we hope to develop and implement these activities as part of our learning cycle during the implementation of this strategic plan.

These findings will be included in our Annual Report to the Mayor, City Council, Denver Department of Public Health and Environment, and the City Auditor along with a description of grants awarded and strategic plan progress updates.
"When you are confronted personally with a mental health challenge in your family or yourself, you realize people cannot do this alone. We need to talk about people’s needs and ensure people can get the care they need. Mental health and substance misuse are everybody’s issues and impact all of us. There is no health without mental health."

- Don Mares
  Caring for Denver Board Member