



We need to be comfortable with adapting an idea if it's not what people actually need or want. Funders that are willing to understand the value of authentic community engagement and co-design are decolonizing in the realm of philanthropy.

- La Cocina

Overview

In November 2020, we established partnerships with 26 organizations to deliver community-based programs that support improved mental health and reduced substance misuse for Denver residents. These programs are working to improve access to care, ensuring people have resources to support wellness in the places and spaces that make sense for their daily lives. They are also helping to improve the quality of care available by offering interventions that are imagined, created, and delivered by communities themselves. Through these programs, we hope to support increased engagement in wellness activities, increased community connections that reduce isolation and stigma, and improved mental health and substance misuse outcomes for those reached.

Caring For Denver Foundation is committed to learning both as a measure of progress and to guide our future actions. Deeply listening to our grantees and their expertise is part of this commitment.

Learning Briefs share back what we are learning and how grantees are helping us think about our work differently.

We are thankful to Community-Centered Solutions grantees for their passion and honesty in helping lift up these important points of reflection.



KEY GRANTEE PROGRESS AREAS

During our six-month learning calls with grantees, they shared ways they are making grant progress.

“ We are creating different ways for people to experience wellness and have the support and interaction they need. It’s about balancing the counseling component with something that is more dynamic, like art or skating. ”

- D3 Arts



Hiring and Onboarding Staff

Grantees are making progress at getting behavioral health specialists, social workers, case managers, peer navigators, and clinical therapists into newly funded roles. Hiring has been a challenge for many grantees, so this progress feels noteworthy for those trying to get programs expanded during the pandemic.



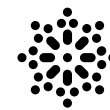
Partnership Development & Referral Systems

For both established programs and new programs, developing relationships with partner organizations has been a significant area of progress. A critical piece of this is building out referral systems and resource banks to effectively direct clients to appropriate services. Described by many grantees as “building an ecosystem of supports,” referrals include community-based activities (e.g., art therapy, book clubs, tai chi), basic-needs support (e.g., food, clothing, Wi-Fi), clinical therapy, and population-focused support (e.g., LGBTQ+ youth, Latinx mothers).



Evaluation

Many grantees are thinking about how to effectively measure impact, especially for community-based programming. Approximately one third of grantees referenced the importance of balancing compliance and clinical measures (outcomes on validated surveys) with community-tested measures (e.g., trust of providers, social connections, wrap-around supports, self-awareness).



Program Development

Several grantees are implementing new mental health wellness programs or integrating new mental health wellness concepts into existing programs. Program development includes writing curriculum; building resource banks; concretizing branding and messaging (for new organizations); building evaluation and tracking systems; and recruiting participants. Some grantees are completing needs assessments to understand how their community conceives of and wants to address mental health.

GRANTEE INSIGHTS ON PROGRESS

Grantees also shared what they understand to be the key facilitators of their progress.

Funding for Dedicated Mental Health Work

With Caring for Denver funding, grantees hired dedicated positions and developed programming that prioritizes and centers mental health in a new way in their existing programming. Several grantees wanted to address mental health for a long time or have done so informally in addition to their other social support work, but never had funds to support full-time efforts.

Staff With Lived Experience

Staff with lived experience of mental health and substance misuse challenges connect with clients authentically and drive increased participation. These staff often provide better referrals and navigation because they have navigated the system themselves, have established relationships with peer navigators at other organizations, and they decrease stigma by offering a picture of successful maintenance and/or recovery.

Balanced Programming

Offering programs that both incorporate activities the participants enjoy and include clinical intervention techniques drive increased participation in mental health programming overall. By using a holistic suite of activities to reach people where they are (e.g., Aztec dance, yoga, skateboarding, art galleries, Rockies' games) organizations can reach many of the historically underserved populations who may have been turned off to more traditional mental health or sobriety services before. Grantees are broadcasting messages that emphasize mental wellness is for everyone through programs, events, and communications. Many grantees are exploring different words or phrases beyond "mental health" to effectively open the conversation in their communities.

Effective Training that Builds Confidence & Skills

Grantees are training new staff in mental health first aid, equity in behavioral health, identifying mental health challenges in individuals, and resource navigation. These trainings build staff's skillset to provide better referrals and follow-up care to clients, especially for organizations that are providing new mental health services in addition to work they did before. Many grantees are also providing training for promotoras, community health workers, and peer specialists to help increase confidence and skills around providing peer supports, and to promote the value of lived experience.



I find myself pinching myself - We all experienced homelessness together, moved through recovery, and now we're leading these wellness programs together. I feel like - Wow. It's beautiful.

- Colorado Village Collaborative

Increased Attention to Mental Health

The pandemic is bringing mental health to the forefront. People are feeling an increased openness about their need for social connection, people struggling with stress and economic hardship are reaching out for help, and people are more open to trying therapeutic activities. With society at large talking about the importance of mental health, there is less stigma around getting support. This is positively impacting program attendance.

Virtual Can Work Once They've Gotten in the Door

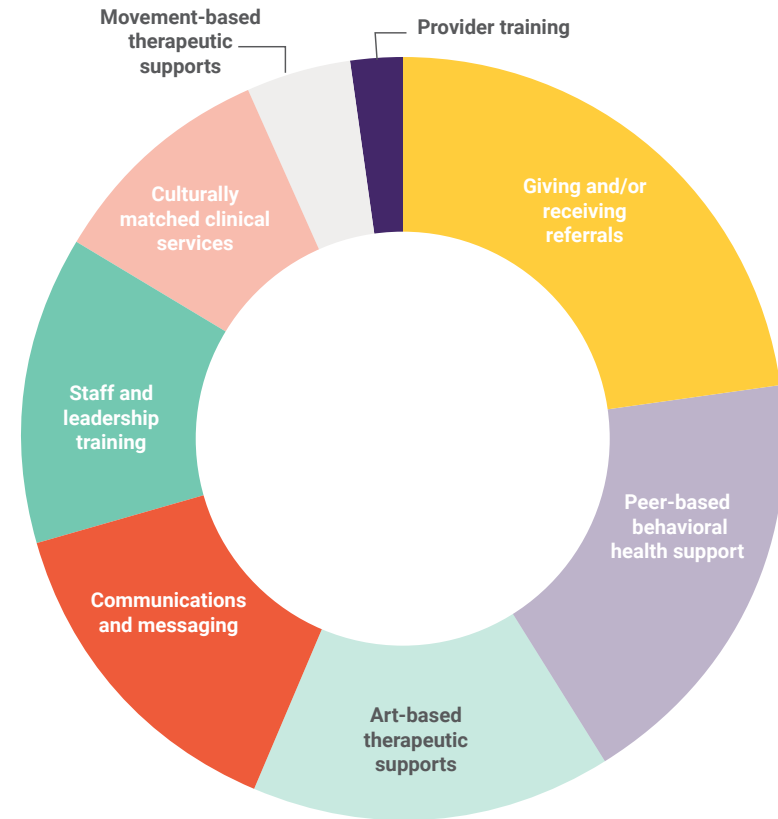
Some grantees see that basic needs supports get people in the door, and providing these supports builds trust. With increased trust, people are more willing to also engage in offered mental health supports, including virtual programs and activities. For some individuals, virtual mental health support can be less invasive, ensure better privacy, and be more convenient.



We are seeing a lot more conversation around mental health and more interest, especially from LGBTQ+ folks, and especially for young folks. After the pandemic, it's like everyone is struggling, so it makes it okay to say, "I'm struggling too." We're seeing a lot more invitations to partner as well.

- Envision:You

EXAMPLES OF FUNDED ACTIVITIES AMONG CCS 2020 GRANTEES



Giving and/or receiving referrals to mental health and substance misuse resources, clinical therapy, in-patient facilities, community connection resources, and identity-based support (e.g., transgender women, youth).

Peer-based behavioral health support includes assistance with resource navigation, case management, facilitation of wellness activities/groups, and therapeutic support, often by peers with lived experience with mental health or substance misuse.

Art-based therapeutic supports including theatre, writing, painting, drawing, and improvisation.

Communications and messaging to change the narrative in community about mental health and substance misuse, especially spreading the word about resources and combating myths that reinforce stigma.

Staff and leadership training in mental health first aid, resource navigation, combating social isolation, coping and resiliency skills, and trauma-informed care.

Culturally matched clinical services, especially for historically under-served populations including people of color.

Movement-based therapeutic supports including yoga, tai chi, gardening, and others.

Provider training for behavioral health providers, especially to support the needs of specific populations like LGBTQ+.

GRANTEE INSIGHTS ON CHALLENGES & BARRIERS

We asked grantees to share what challenges or barriers they faced, and ways they adapted.

Referral Fit & Expectations

For grantees who work closely with community, making sure a referral is a good fit for the person served is a priority. The right fit can be hard to find. Many community-based organizations lack communication resources and have limited staff, so clearly defining and communicating their service population, their approach, and their values to others can be a challenge. This leads to referrals that misalign which is frustrating for clients and staff and wastes resources. Communicating well can be particularly hard for new organizations or those doing mental health work for the first time.

Reach

Without being able to offer in-person supports that draw people in (e.g., food pantry, clothing drive) it's much harder to reach certain populations that would normally drop in and then could be engaged with mental health support. In addition, people are left out of virtual options if they lack the technology or privacy to connect virtually. Several grantees have used funds to purchase tablets, phones, or Wi-Fi hotspots for participants, but people still need technical supports that grantees don't have the capacity to fulfill.

Capacity

The pandemic caused turnover and organizational resets, decreasing overall capacity, and forcing leadership to take on a lot of roles. Staff are burnt out from a tough year, personally and professionally. Several grantees are new nonprofit organizations or growing significantly from this funding. It takes time to build necessary infrastructure like boards, staff structures, curriculum, and branding before even beginning programming.

Workforce Availability

Many grantees are hiring right now but are not receiving many applications or finding qualified applicants. Several grantees mentioned reasons for this, such as pandemic fatigue in the field, difficulty offering competitive salaries and benefits, and challenges finding the right cultural fit which is key to their program's success.



The pandemic and its repercussions have shifted the talent landscape for many nonprofits. We know there are a lot of social work graduates entering the work force. We are competing with private, public, and nonprofit organizations to fill behavioral health positions right now. We are trying to build a people-first culture and are committed to finding the right match for our organization and community.

- The Center for African American Health



GRANTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

Finally, grantees shared their suggestions of what supports are essential for their continued success.



SOCIAL CAPITAL & PARTNERSHIPS ARE INVALUABLE

Existing relationships with clients, community, and partners facilitates broader outreach. Organizations with deep ties in a community are seen as part of the community, so when they offer participation in a new program or concept like mental health, people engage more readily.

“MANY SIZES FITS ALL” IS KEY


Each community and individual is a bit different, especially when it comes to what it means to be well. We must integrate wellness into the fabric of our communities, so everyone feels connected to the concept. Starting with the self is best – what does healing look like to you? What does wellness mean to you?

EVALUATION & IMPACT IS COMPLEX

The ways to measure success may be defined differently by individuals, communities, and populations impacted. Transactions are easy to measure, but transformation is more difficult. We want to make sure the in-between learning and progress along the way towards impact are recognized too.

INVESTMENT IN COLLABORATIONS IS CRITICAL

We need to build ecosystems of support, and that means foundations need to prioritize collaboration versus competition among nonprofits. A network of smaller, community-based organizations can work together to provide multiple doors to link people to services and refer to larger service providers as needed.

 *We're working with a lot of other organizations who are working with Caring for Denver as well. We're creating those connections, and we've all received funding for our different visions and dreams, and it's working together!*

- The Don't Look Back Center

STAFF MENTAL HEALTH MUST BE SUPPORTED TOO

People want to receive wellness support from people who are well. For both ethical and programmatic reasons, supporting staff to be well must be a focus if we're going to impact mental health in the City of Denver.

LONG-TERM FUNDING IS A MUST FOR TRANSFORMATIVE WORK

The kind of care being built through community solutions won't happen in one year. It's stressful to offer something to the community that you're not sure will continue after one year, especially for folks in recovery who need consistency above all.

As a foundation, we used these grantee insights and more detailed grantee data internally to update our next Community-Centered Solutions call for proposals, assess how we are showing up in the field, and define how we can do better.

Our Key Takeaways

- 1 Especially in the community-centered solutions space, relationship and connections are critical. We recognize the importance of supporting organizations that prioritize and leverage their relationships with the community, and we will work to support newer organizations in connecting with partners.
- 2 Grantees need more than dollars from funders. We will continue to prioritize our relationship-based approach to grants management that helps to build trust and partnership. We will also continue to invest in technical assistance resources to support grantees.
- 3 Evaluating impact when working deeply in community is complex. We will continue to support grantees in identifying and reporting on what they see as the most valuable and meaningful aspects of their work. We will also continue our conversation-based reports that create space for talking about the transformational aspects of programs that aren't easily captured in numbers.



Caring for Denver Foundation

Great to know you have a funding partner that's got your back.

- CHARG Resource Center


GRANTEE MATRIX


Grantees expressed a desire to connect with others who are working on addressing the same areas. This matrix is one way we hope to support this desire. Grantee names are listed at right, linked to organizational websites. We've used shading below to highlight some common activities grantees are implementing. Please reach out to us if you would like help making a connection.

	Benefits in Action	Centro Humanitario Para Los Trabajadores	CHARG Resource Center	Cleo Parker Robinson Dance	Colorado Artists in Recovery	Colorado Gerontological Society	Colorado Village Collaborative	D3 Arts	Denver Children's Advocacy Center	Denver Public Library Friends Foundation	Envision:You	La Cocina	Mirror Image Arts	Montbello Organizing Committee	PlatteForum	Project Helping	Sisters of Color United for Education	Sober AF Entertainment	Su Teatro Cultural and Performing Arts Center	The Center for African American Health	The Don't Look Back Center	The Gathering Place	The Storytellers Project	Think 360 Arts for Learning	Vive Wellness	Youth Seen
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MAILING ADDRESS:

Caring for Denver Foundation
Kaleidoscope Collaborative Center
1035 Osage Street, 8th Floor
Denver, CO 80204
Main: 720.647.6380