

Rural Community Response & Recovery Project

PHASE I REPORT
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PROJECT BACKGROUND



As COVID-19 swept across the country, it quickly made its way into rural communities. Though less densely populated, rural areas were no less susceptible to the virus' spread. In fact, a dearth of infrastructure, wealth, public health services, and health care made rural regions particularly vulnerable to the short- and long-term impact of the pandemic.

The Rural Community Response and Recovery Project (CRP) was conceived to support rural regions hit hard by COVID-19's impact on local economies and the basic human needs of communities. In a spirit of collaboration, the leadership of ZOMA Foundation, Telluride Foundation, and The Denver Foundation developed the CRP to provide unrestricted financial support along with peer learning and technical assistance to organizations that could most effectively support highly impacted community members.

Six senior leaders from statewide foundations and a rural lender were recruited to an advisory committee. The advisory committee (list in chart on next page) provided critical advice on program development, rural regions, and organization selection. Recognizing that effective and timely

delivery of program services was critical, the advisory committee focused on service providers, such as family resource centers, that were best equipped to offer efficient, direct support to communities.

The project centered on six service provider organizations—or “Hubs”—across rural Colorado. Organizations were selected based on service offerings, leadership capacity, and the needs of their region. Each was assigned a mentor from the Advisory Committee. They were then asked to fill out an organizational needs assessment, which was essentially a non-prescriptive grant application.

In total, about \$1.5M was granted across the six organizations. Each organization received \$100,000-\$375,000.

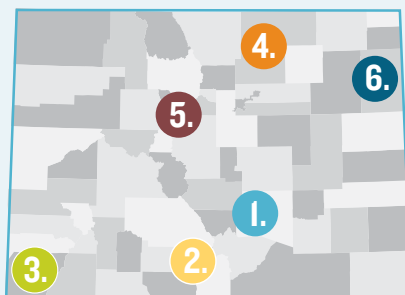
Along with the review and funding of the needs assessment, the project included a peer learning component that brought the Hubs together for five separate sessions, each focused on specific themes such as early childhood needs. These sessions were facilitated and led by Amy Swiatek of the Philanthropy Colorado Rural Funders Learning Network. (See Peer Learning Cohort Highlights in Appendix.)



THE RURAL COMMUNITY RESPONSE AND RECOVERY PROJECT

HUB	CONTACT	LOCATION	ADVISORS
The Piñon Project	Kellie Willis	Cortez	Paul Major, Telluride Foundation
Centennial Fund	Melanie Bravo	Pueblo	Kyle Hybl, El Pomar Foundation
Summit County FIRC	Danielle McQueen	Silverthorne	Tony Lewis, Donnell-Kay Foundation
La Puente Home	Lance Cheslock	San Luis Valley	Mike O'Donnell, Colorado Lending Source
United Way Weld County	Lyle SmithGraybeal	Weld County	Javier Alberto Soto, The Denver Foundation
Rural Communities Resource Center	Margo Ebersole	Yuma	Linda Reiner, Caring for Colorado

PROJECT GRANTEES



1. Caring for Colorado Centennial Fund, Pueblo
2. La Puente Home, San Luis Valley
3. The Piñon Project, Cortez
4. Rural Communities Resource Center, Yuma
5. Summit County Family Resource Center, Silverthorne
6. United Way of Weld County, Greeley

LESSONS LEARNED



This program was somewhat unique in that it quickly deployed flexible funds to service providers and followed up with peer-based support. The funding came from a donor-advised fund, which increased efficiency, but the program also leveraged the experience of foundation leaders to increase impact. Through this process, several lessons emerged that could help guide other funders, including foundations, government funders, and others focused on rural communities.

1.) It's important to meet communities where they are in times of crisis.

Unprecedented crises like COVID-19 demand creative approaches to helping organizations continue their work. In this case, it involved creating a participatory, collaborative model based on trust and flexibility built on the assumption that impacted communities best understood their needs and challenges. This enabled the Hubs to address the crisis in the way they saw as most appropriate. The Hubs in this project know their communities best, and CRP funds allowed them to allocate resources in a needs-based manner, in which they could use the flexible funds of the CRP to fill unmet need gaps. This enabled the Hubs to reach low-access populations throughout the margins of their communities. For example a notable portion of the CRP funds went towards adding more staff at the Hubs or their partner nonprofits in order to meet the increased demand for services caused by the pandemic and a dearth of volunteers. Funding to increase staff for existing programs can be more difficult to come by through more traditional funding streams, though desperately needed.

2.) There is value in networking and information sharing between rural organizations. Funders can support rural organizations by co-creating systems,

opportunities, and infrastructure for these connections.

The peer learning sessions with focused themes (e.g., housing, DEI, etc.) led to very valuable information-sharing among the Hubs organizations. Rural organizations often face different challenges than those in densely populated urban areas. Several organizations reported being underserved by existing collaboration forums that primarily focused on urban challenges. In the CRP peer learning sessions, creative ideas shared between the Hubs led to “quick wins,” such as the idea of hosting “pop-up” resource centers in extremely rural areas. There were also deeper strategic conversations about confronting the challenges faced by rural communities and developing mutual support among the Hubs’ leadership. In terms of structure, the small group size and open facilitation style made the sessions productive and helpful from the outset. Each session was co-led and designed by one of the Hubs’ leaders.

3.) Explicit and open conversations about the relationships between funders and the organizations they fund are essential.

The interactions between the Hubs and the Advisory Committee exposed the disconnect that frequently occurs between funders and fundees. Fundees often find funding sources like those offered by foundations difficult and opaque to navigate; often, grant applications are not structured to meet their needs. The CRP worked to shift this power dynamic by facilitating open and honest conversations centered on the Hubs’ needs. Hubs reported finding value in building informal and trusting relationships with funders, which provided channels to connect with even more funders and gain a better understanding of potential funding streams. Furthermore, the CRP staff, Advisory Committee and Hubs effectively used the CRP connection as a platform to share resources, information, and funding opportunities.



RECOMMENDATIONS

This program was conceived and executed very quickly. Though the program was successful in rapidly supporting the Hubs, post-program feedback from the Hubs and reflections of the CRP staff informed the following suggestions for improvement.

1) Find a balance between flexibility and structure.

At times, the Hubs wanted more explicit direction, more information on the specific expectations of the funder, and more information on the other Hubs participating in the project. Due to the desire to rapidly respond to the crisis and be responsive to the Hubs' needs, the CRP staff intentionally avoided putting up "guardrails" or listing explicit expectations of the Hubs. However, a better balance between expectation and freedom could have been struck, particularly by providing more specific information to Hubs at the beginning of the project. In particular, the expectations of the mentorship relationship were not well-defined on either side. The CRP could have helped create a specific set of goals for each Hub's mentorship relationship.

2) Include Advisory Committee Members in more of the peer learning sessions and work even harder to break down any barriers between funders and fundees.

The Hubs valued the personal connections with funders they gained through this project. In the interest of protecting the time of the voluntary Advisory Committee members, the members were

not asked to play a major role in the peer learning sessions. At the end of the program, Hubs shared that they wished funders had been more involved in these sessions, so finding a better balance and setting clear expectations could alleviate this issue.

3) Invest in capacity for high-level technical assistance alongside financial assistance.

One of the CRP's original goals was to provide the Hubs' assistance alongside financial assistance. Though the Hubs were asked about potential technical assistance in their needs assessment, the CRP struggled to devise a way to act on the requests of the Hubs. This was primarily due to the capacity limitations of both the Hubs and the CRP staff as they responded to an urgent crisis. Often, technical assistance does not become a priority until an emergency technical problem arises. A stronger program could find ways to incorporate both.

STORIES OF IMPACT

The following stories are some of many told by the Hubs' leaders at the end of this phase of the project. They paint a colorful picture of the CRP's impacts.



SUMMIT FAMILY INTERCULTURAL RESOURCE CENTER, SUMMIT COUNTY

Online application system for renters & landlords streamlined support for over 700 households

As a result of the CRP grant, FIRC has sustained a partnership aimed at increasing FIRC's capacity to serve the community safely and efficiently during the pandemic, through technology and data development services. Through this partnership, FIRC developed an online application system for both renters and landlords, thereby streamlining the process and supporting over 700 households with close to \$1M in rental relief. CRP funds also allowed FIRC to quickly hire two bilingual seasonal Supportive Services staff to manage the rental relief program.

CARING FOR COLORADO CENTENNIAL FUND, PUEBLO

Food service provider grew staff to meet huge increase in need among low-income families and individuals

Pueblo Cooperative Care Center received \$20,000 in support from CRP. This organization is the largest emergency food service provider for low-income families and individuals in Pueblo County. In addition to experiencing an increase in community need—the number of unduplicated households served increased by 36% from the previous year—the pandemic decimated the Center's business model, which relies on the service of hundreds of dedicated volunteers. The average age of a Center volunteer is 74, and the organization did not want to put its volunteers at risk. As a result, the Center had to hire

staff to maintain services. The organization started with six staff in January and grew to 15 by the end of the year. This made a significant impact on the Center's annual budget. Although the Center received substantial funding and support from government and foundation sources in 2020, a large percentage of those resources were designated for purchasing food. The flexibility of the CPR money was a lifeline and helped cover some of the Center's rising personnel costs at a critical time.

LA PUENTE HOME, SAN LUIS VALLEY

Flexible resources provide support for families in need

Jamie, the assistant director of La Puente Home's Adelante Family Resource Center, could barely get the story out. She reminded us of a success story from the previous year: a dad went from living in his vehicle, with his children removed by social services, to complying with court orders and boldly advocating for himself to regain custody of his girls. Tears came to all of our eyes when Jamie told us the random cruelty of the COVID-19 virus had taken the man's life. This devastated the entire Adelante family and was a catastrophe for the children. An aunt was going to take in the girls, but the financial crush of moving the girls and their possessions to Grand Junction, Colorado, was more than the aunt had resources for. Funds to aid this type of event are not usually available; however, the flexibility of CRP funds helped us give this new family a stronger start.

STORIES OF IMPACT



THE PIÑON PROJECT, CORTEZ

A new home for supportive housing in Cortez

As a result of this funding, The Piñon Project was able to purchase land to be utilized in a permanent supportive housing project. This land provides a needed match for other funding, provides a big headstart and positive position for a Low Income Housing Tax Credit application that the project will submit, and will ultimately create some service budget funding when the project is completed.

RURAL COMMUNITY RESOURCE CENTER, YUMA COUNTY

A direct and personal approach to meeting basic needs

At one of the early ‘pop-up’ food events we did in Joes, Colorado, we spoke to an elderly couple who needed support. They came to get food and then asked if staff knew about any other services, specifically funding to pay for eyeglasses. We were able to have a conversation to determine their needs right in the middle of a dirt parking lot! Soon after, we were able to follow up by mail and by telephone, and ultimately the woman was able to get her eyeglasses paid for through a regional program. It was simple, and her need was met. If we hadn’t gone directly into her community, this would not have happened.

UNITED WAY WELD COUNTY

Expanded capacity to serve veterans in Weld and Larimer counties

The part of CRP that I am most excited about is the

Weld County Nonprofit Capacity Building Assistance Fund, the intent of which is to help some of our area’s most important nonprofits better prepare for the immediate and mid-term future. The Northern Colorado Veterans Resource Center (NoCO VRC) is one of the applicants. After NoCO recently merged with a Larimer County veteran-serving nonprofit, the application describes how the NoCO VRC needs resources to update its website, implement an existing social media plan, train its board of directors for better governance, and more. The fund will likely provide a modest \$8,000 investment. Because of the CRP, many veterans in Weld and Larimer counties will be better served into the future.

LOOKING FORWARD

Though the CRP was intended to be a one-time injection of funding, the goal was to set organizations up for long-term success. The formal Phase 1 of the CRP has wrapped up, but the Rural Funders Learning Network plans to continue peer learning for interested organizations, including others who did not participate in Phase 1. Conversation topics will likely include a focus on sustainability, the development of additional funding streams, and transition from the “response” phase of COVID to the “recovery-phase.” Please reach out to Amy Swiatek at Philanthropy Colorado if you are interested in supporting the ongoing peer learning or any of the Hubs directly.

APPENDIX

Rural Community Response and Recovery Project Peer Learning Cohort Highlights



KEY ELEMENTS OF THE PEER LEARNING INCLUDED:

- A co-lead from one of the Hub organizations was engaged to help plan and facilitate each of the meetings. This ensured the sessions were relevant, increased overall investment, and took advantage of the strengths and assets of the Hubs.
- There was an emphasis on practical takeaways and specific implementation examples the Hubs could share with one another, as well as available resources. From the very first session to the last, Hubs gleaned ideas from one another to implement in their own area.
- Resources were shared during and after the sessions, such as funding opportunities, networks, webinars, reports/guides, and tools for assessments.
- A mix of peer sharing, facilitated dialogue, and guest speakers was utilized for the peer learning sessions.
- The peer learning incorporated written responses on the various topics into the peer learning. Ahead of the call, each of the Hubs was asked to respond to two to three questions that were designed not to take a lot of additional work to answer. The responses were compiled and sent out ahead of time. It provided an opportunity for individual reflection and review of others' responses for follow-up during the meeting. It also provided an easy point of reference afterward.
- Hub implementation highlights were incorporated into the end of each meeting. One to two volunteers shared a highlight of their efforts or learnings at each meeting.

FIVE PEER LEARNING CALLS WERE HELD MONTHLY FROM AUGUST THROUGH DECEMBER:

1. The initial call focused on getting to know one another, including exchanging information on project plans and priorities. We also gathered input on future peer learning calls, including interest areas and approaches to the peer-learning sessions.

2. The top interest area of the group was to share and exchange information among peers on “incorporating equity in service provision and reaching marginalized populations.”
3. The next session focused on “housing assistance and homeless/eviction prevention during the pandemic” with peer experts in the group who led the sharing and exchange.
4. A timely topic that emerged was on “how to support school-age kids and their families during the pandemic,” with guest speakers from Gates Family Foundation and Donnell-Kay Foundation (on behalf of the Education Innovation Fund) as well as a peer expert to discuss relevant approaches.
5. The last session was on “early childhood care and family support during the pandemic,” with guest speakers from the Buell Foundation and United Way of Weld County Promises for Children. There was also an opportunity to discuss collective learnings for the five peer sessions.

FINAL SUMMARY POINTS:

- The group noted the value in connecting with organizations that are doing similar work and not operating out of a large urban/metro context.
- A common set of needs and issues emerged out of the peer exchange, along with inspiring examples on how to meet the current challenges of the pandemic. For example, there was a practice shared for reaching parents by text. This is something many were considering but not yet doing. More details were shared out during and after the call. It's likely that many started implementing this approach.
- It was important to take full advantage of our meeting time (extended to 90 minutes after the initial one) and not rely on individuals to follow up with one another in between meetings during such a busy time.
- Finally, while there was some exchange and connection fostered with funders throughout the peer learning sessions, this could have been incorporated to a larger degree.

APPENDIX

Rural Community Response and Recovery Project Organizational Assessment



ORGANIZATIONAL ASSESSMENT

Funding may be requested to support community recovery directly or through partners, necessary due to COVID 19 within the following service categories:

- Food insecurity / food banks / hunger
- Housing / homelessness, including rental assistance, support for shelters, and nonprofits serving homeless populations
- Cash assistance programs for working families, including those who are ineligible for government programs or helping individuals navigate community, state, or federal resources.
- Rural population health, including clinics and mental health facilities
- Local nonprofit and small business lending
- Unique and specific community needs identified through an internal needs assessment or other means.

1. Name of Organization

2. Contact Information

- a.) Name, Title
- b.) Email
- c.) Phone
- d.) Mailing Address
- f.) EIN #

3. Locations served, specific to this funding request (list complete or partial counties). Please include any details on specific populations served if appropriate.

4. Which of the service categories would you like to request funding for? (choose as many as applicable)

- Food insecurity / food banks / hunger
- Housing / homelessness, including rental assistance, support for shelters, and nonprofits serving homeless populations

- Cash assistance programs for working families, including those who are ineligible for government programs or helping individuals navigate community, state, or federal resources.
- Rural population health, including clinics and mental health facilities
- Local nonprofit and small business lending
- Unique and specific community needs identified through an internal needs assessment or other means.

5. For each service category selected in Question 4, provide a brief overview of your services provided that includes the following:

- a.) a description of needs within the community
- b.) a description of service offerings provided by your organization
- c.) any changes made to due to COVID
- d.) long-term impact goals and metrics

6. For your overall organization, please share any specific technical assistance or partners you could benefit from to increase sustainability or impact? (i.e., organizational capacity building, managing small business/nonprofit lending programs, direct service capacity building, government programs/entitlement navigation services, etc.)

7. Please share any strengths / success stories you could bring to peer learning around COVID response.

8. Please share your funding needs over the next 6-12 months, ideally broken down by the service categories selected. Please provide a brief description of what these funds will be used for.

9. If you received 3x the funding requested in Question 8, what additional impact could your organization have?