

Broadening the Discussion

about Health and the Built Environment

CCSU promotes health across all sectors of the built environment

A statewide collaborative is expanding the discussion about the connection between health, health equity and the built environment in Colorado. It started with a grant, a planner who took on a coordinating role and a series of pioneering conversations.

"As we began talking about how to improve health outcomes through the places where we live, work and play, we tapped into a real hunger for collaboration that stretched across disciplines and professions," says Rocky Piro, a professional planner and current executive director of the Colorado Center for Sustainable Urbanism (CCSU) at the University of Colorado Denver.

With funding from the Colorado Health Foundation, Piro worked with colleagues to start an intentional dialogue both on campus and with various statewide and regional professional organizations that had not occurred before.

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- Rocky Piro, University of Colorado Denver

Over the past three years, Piro and his partners have been working to create the infrastructure necessary for transformation thinking about health and the built environment. The local chapter of the Urban Land Institute was already engaged in a national initiative called Building Healthy Places, so the group was a natural initial partner. Piro then reached out to those he knew best—planners—and expanded from there. "It took some legwork at times to find the right person, but by our first group meeting, we had representatives from 15 different

organizations, including several professional health associations," Piro says.

At subsequent meetings, that number often swelled to nearly two dozen organizations with upwards of 75 attendees—including interested community members—and spawned the creation of the Colorado Healthy Places Collaborative. Today, along with community members, the group includes professionals with expertise in public health, planning and design, engineering, land use and development, building and construction, advocacy, policy, the environment, sustainability and more.

As the conversation continues, the university, in partnership with the collaborative, has recently released a series of tools for professionals, educators and community groups, while the collaborative eyes the next steps to maximize positive health outcomes.

"Whether you're a designer, developer, public health official or anyone else with a hand in shaping a community," Piro says, "health has become the lynchpin for planning in the 21st century."



CCSU's guidebook encourages healthy amenities in buildings





Conversation guide

Projects and initiatives related to health and health equity in the built environment often start with a conversation between individuals or among small groups. It may be a formal convening led by a foundation or city agency, a workshop at a convention or even coffee between colleagues.

The Joint Call to Action to Promote Healthy Communities is engaged in a year-long effort to spur these conversations among our members and beyond. We've compiled stories about discussions that have led to healthy solutions at the community, regional and state levels.

Here are the questions they asked in Denver →

WHO'S COME TO THE TABLE SO FAR

The Colorado Healthy Places Collaborative is a partnership of two dozen statewide and regional associations and groups that have united to work on advancing health and wellness in communities across the state of Colorado. The Collaborative includes professionals with expertise in public health, planning and design, engineering, land use and development, building and construction, advocacy, policy, the environment, sustainability and more. This group represents a unique partnership of practitioners, academics and engaged citizens.

1. STARTING THE CONVERSATION

The connection between health, health equity and the built environment was new ground in Colorado. A series of questions led to initial conversations as the initiative was taking shape:

- What professional responsibilities and opportunities surrounding health and health equity do we have as practitioners?
- What other practitioners do we know actively working on this issue?
- Where does our professional knowledge and expertise end?
- What other professions should we tap to help us identify and improve health outcomes?
- What else can we do at the state level to lift up health and health equity?

2. BUILDING OUT THE CONVERSATION

As the collaborative began taking shape, two partner organizations, the American Planning Association and the Urban Land Institute, created "healthy places committees" within their Colorado chapters. They and others began connecting with other groups and associations. Questions at this point included:

- Who are the key contacts, whether subject matter experts or leadership, at local and state chapters of national organizations we should contact and potentially coordinate with?
- Are there other like-minded organizations and individuals whose perspectives would be valuable?
- Are there potential funding opportunities available?
- How do we ensure we're effectively connecting with communities to learn about their specific health and health equity needs?

3. CLOSING THE LOOP

An initial group of 15 organizations, which grew to more than two dozen within a year—including the local chapters of the eight Joint Call to Action to Promote Healthy Communities organizations—convened to launch the Colorado Healthy Places Collaborative. Key questions at this point included:

- How do we define health equity, and how do we ensure we're addressing the needs of—and engaging with—all types of Colorado communities, whether high- or low-income, urban or rural?
- How do we ensure the materials we've created to answer these questions—including the Creating Healthy Places Guidebook, the GuideBox to Healthy Places and the Health Assessment Lens—are meeting the needs of our intended users?
- With a large number of individuals and organizations participating, how do we ensure we're making productive use of everyone's time?