



Community Partners Forum | August 31, 2017 | St. Vrain Community Hub, Longmont

On Thursday, August 31, 2017, the Boulder County Departments of Housing and Human Services and Community Services and Boulder County Public Health hosted a Community Partners Forum at the St. Vrain Community Hub in Longmont. The purpose of the forum was to share information from the three departments about known impacts on funding and policy during a time of uncertainty around many of the programs we administer to support our community, and to have a dialogue with partners about impacts they are experiencing or expecting. Over fifty directors and other staff representing deep expertise across many disciplines from several dozen organizations were joined by county staff for the forum, which featured 45-minute table discussions followed by report-outs and additional questions and answers with the full group.



Boulder County Housing and Human Services Director Frank Alexander, Community Services Director Robin Bohannon, and Public Health Director Jeff Zayach kicked off the forum with summaries as follows:



Frank Alexander: We have been in a time of uncertainty, and while we have expected potential major cuts to programs or funding, we have not yet seen this. This is overall a positive thing. All of us in this room have been working together for years, decades in some cases. We've been through recessions, disasters, major policy changes together, and each time we work stronger together as a community, communicate better and share information, and increase our trust in these partnerships.

At Boulder County Housing and Human Services, we have been working on significant preparation as a result of what we do and don't know. Despite the fact that we haven't yet seen major cuts, we anticipate difficulty ahead. Our systems are strong, but we don't see significant funding improvements from where we are, and we know that proactive and strategic preparation is what has helped us as a community be in the strong place we are in today.

Much of our work over the past six months on the federal level has been focused on the Affordable Care Act, and in particular the Medicaid expansion. When we look from a macro community perspective Medicaid funding is the single largest federal funding stream our system receives. This past year, Medicaid represented nearly \$300 million coming into Boulder County, and currently about 63,000 of our residents are utilizing the Medicaid program. So we've been working with people in this room and across the state to ensure that the importance of Medicaid to the entire health, housing, and human services safety net is as understood as much as possible by our federal and state delegations. We feel positive about the fact that there is more substantive conversation on health reform occurring at this time.

From a federal budgetary level, we don't know what's going to happen. There's not much time to pass a new budget now. It's likely there will either be a federal government shutdown or a continuing resolution passed by to the end of September. We will know this fairly soon (**note: this has in fact now occurred for three months until the end of December 2018**). The president's proposed budget has shown major cuts to the federal funding streams that all of us rely on in the community and that support the clients and families we serve. These proposed cuts have not yet passed, so these are not actualized reductions that we can address at this time.

At the state level, the current funding streams that we rely on, many of which are federal pass-throughs with a state match, are more constrained than they have been in prior years.

Within our Child Welfare system, we already know we have to implement a \$1.2 million cut to those services this year. The primary reason for the reduction is that there has been a significant increase in the Child Welfare system workload statewide from the implementation of the new statewide hotline. Additional funding to keep up with this increased workload hasn't occurred, so the distribution of the funding doesn't go as far. Also, there are many unknowns related to the federal IV-E Waiver, which is about \$1 million in flexible funding we use through Child Welfare to help stabilize families and keep them together. Congress hasn't acted on Child Welfare funding or reform yet.

In our child care assistance program, we are also seeing operating in an increasingly constrained environment. The Human Services Safety Net property tax initiative, when it was passed in 2010, had as a central focus area the funding of child care in Boulder County. This allowed us to expand access to child care here in part with these local matching funds. We have recently moved to a system of increased child care provider reimbursement that is based on tiers of quality. This, in combination with the fact that we have access to about \$2 million per year less than we have had in the past in statewide funding, is constraining the 2018 child care budget.

At the local level, we're in a positive environment in Boulder County with a healthy economy, a low unemployment rate, and an increase in property tax revenues. Economically we are in a good situation as a community to deal with uncertainty. I know one question we have been asked repeatedly is *do we anticipate that there would be cuts to the community-based organization funding streams (?)*, and the answer to that is "no." Our agency is working to handle the

federal and state budget uncertainties and to ensure that community funding and direct funding for clients for 2018 is preserved at its current level. While it's impossible to make promises about what we don't know, we do not anticipate changes to this community and direct client funding.



Robin Bohannan: Like every federally-funded agency, we are worried about what first came out in the federal budget and the huge cuts we were anticipating. We're still a bit worried about significant cuts to our Workforce Center, and to the Community Services Block Grant (CSBG), which funds Circles. We know that the Assets for Independence fund already got cut, and that funds the PIE program. Luckily, we have funding in that program for the next few years so we are not stopping it.

But I want to speak to the vulnerability and anxiety that we're all feeling about the unknown. Like Frank said, we're looking internally, making adjustments, and holding hiring for a while, until we get through this next month to see what's happened. But what I want to stress is our community values. Whatever happens, it's not going to change our values and our mission and how we provide services. We're also worried about policy issues that impact the residents we serve. The County Commissioners and the County Attorney's office have made it clear that regardless of what happens at the federal level around immigration policy, we are not going to become agents of immigration policy. So locally we're doing a lot to ensure that the community feels safe and knows that we are not going to hand over data or report people, that people have access to services that make a healthy community.



Jeff Zayach: I want to start by saying that the reason we are more stable in this county than our counterparts across the state is because of the support of many of you in this room who I know have worked on the supportive taxes that have allowed us to be in this place. So thank you to those of you in this room who are committed to this work. These values come through in this community and it's why we are as resilient as we are.

With a government shutdown, the biggest threat to Public Health is really our Women, Infants and Children Program, WIC. It's not having funding in place to continue our services. We were in this spot in 2013 and we are doing the same thing today that we did then. We will cover the funding. We can't do that forever, but we can do that for a while to be sure that we don't have to lay off our staff. We are working with Community Food Share to assure that if there is a shutdown, there's still food available to our clients in the community. Again, it's a demonstration of the resiliency in this community and how we work together to make sure that we don't fall down.

Also, we are tracking administrative actions that are happening at the federal government that are impacting people. The administration has made a decision around Title X Family Planning services and pregnancy prevention, so instead of funding it to 2020, they've cut it back to mid-2018. We are doing everything we can to advocate on issues like this.

I also want you to hear that Robin, Frank, and I have all been working closely together along with our County Commissioners and national, state, and local officials, and we have done a lot of outreach to our Congressional delegation. They have heard from us and multiple bipartisan groups around the state, including business representatives and university and healthcare leaders. We are very invested in this, we're going to continue to support that kind of approach, and we'll do everything we can to make sure we support our community and the work we've built for so many years.

Following these introductions, table discussions took place, and three questions were put forward:

1. What are your agency's specific concerns, how do you see them playing out, and in what time frame?
2. What are your specific concerns for the broader community, how do you see them playing out, and in what time frame?
3. What suggestions do you have for actions we could take as a safety net to prepare for a response to cuts during the next 1 to 2 years?

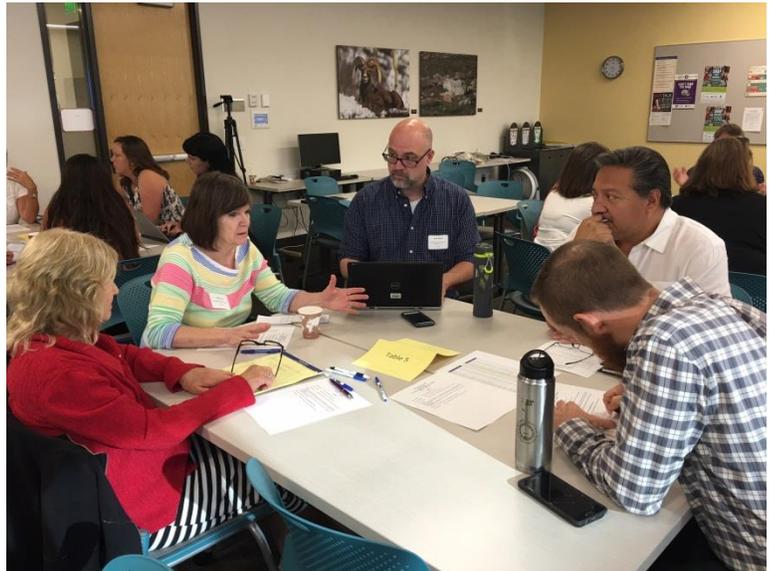
This report captures the most common concerns and suggestions that emerged from those table discussions.

Concerns

There were many concerns expressed around potential loss of **Medicaid funding** in the community, particularly the Medicaid expansion under the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA). Among other impacts, loss of this funding would have a ripple effect throughout Boulder County as access to preventive care would decline and medical bills would accumulate for many who are most in need of health care, but would then lack coverage. This would lead to reduced spending on other critical needs such as food, housing, and transportation, deepening the need for assistance in these and other areas.

Housing affordability was also a major issue for many partners. Support organizations are increasingly hearing from clients that lack of access to safe affordable housing is creating a ripple effect for families and individuals, leading more people toward instability and crisis. Enhanced by the after-effects of the 2013 Flood, the competitive housing market and relatively strong economy continue to drive housing prices upward, and the region is unable to keep up with the need for significantly more permanently-affordable housing.

Homelessness came up in many discussions, as well, closely tied to the need to sustainably address housing affordability and boost employment and mental health supports across the community.



Alongside this, many discussed the desire to help ensure we as a community don't lose our focus on **early intervention and prevention**, and that we continue to target funding toward upstream supports. Some indicated concern around how we can accomplish this with reduced funding. "We can only do so much," one report-out stated. "How can we do more with less?"

Immigration issues are also a central concern across our community. Undocumented people and their families face increasing pressure from uncertainty around the federal government's immigration policies in light of the conversation at the national level. Some forum participants said that this uncertainty is increasing clients' barriers to a range of supports by reducing their access due to fear of deportation, and that this is leading to a reduction in undocumented people and others seeking assistance. Additional concerns included predation –taking advantage of the undocumented population financially and otherwise. The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) initiative was also listed as a concern, as approximately 17,000 people in Colorado and 1,500 in Boulder County could be impacted by its rescission.

Federal grant funding was also a central concern for many at the forum, as related to serving homeless and pregnant/parenting youth and workforce access supports in particular, as well as senior populations supported through the Older Americans Act.

Some attendees discussed the impacts that funding cuts (AmeriCorps, for example) may have on the ability of organizations to provide **volunteers**, which are an essential component of service provision for many.

While there is still much that is unknown about the future of budgets related to the collective work of our partnership, deep concern was expressed around the potential that **flat funding** could be a best case scenario. During a time when

the need for supports continues to rise across our community and wages are generally not keeping up with the cost of living, flat funding is not seen as sufficient. For many partners, the cost of the work they do (utilities, housing, food) also continues to rise and this is not being matched by flat (or in some cases reduced) funding.

It was also mentioned that **foundation funding processes** can often be competitive in nature and may not incentivize collaboration.



Regulatory restrictions are also seen as significant obstacles for many of the supports we provide to members of our community, and feedback indicated a need to work together to help soften some of these. Some attendees suggested we pursue more **local control and flexibility** with the resources we have available so that decisions around key supports are made in closer proximity to where those supports are needed. Other suggestions included ensuring that initiatives around local tax revenues are constructed in ways that make them flexible and better able to adapt to local needs as they change or as they are determined.

Food insecurity was an issue for many at the forum, and discussions ranged from the need for better

collaboration across the community on getting nutrition supports to people to ensuring that people have access to the transportation they need to visit food banks and other supportive organizations.

The need for additional **child care assistance** supports and the recent re-establishment of a Child Care Assistance Program waitlist in Boulder County were also concerns that were expressed, as reductions in these supports make it difficult for more parents to maintain adequate employment.

The **increase in substance use** across our community is also seen as a worsening issue, as this creates problems in many other areas – child welfare concerns, homelessness, decreased school performance, and much more. This is closely tied to the need to focus resources on increased access to **mental health supports**, and for organizations to work together more to ensure our collective clients are getting the help they need in behavioral health. Some concern was expressed around the increased availability and potency of marijuana in the community and its impact on younger populations.

It was expressed that there has been a general **increase in anxiety** in our community, leading to an overall feeling of vulnerability.

While there is a **swing toward focusing on outcomes** across our community, including for prioritization of funding, some are concerned that some outputs are now not being given the weight they should have – how much food we are providing, for example.

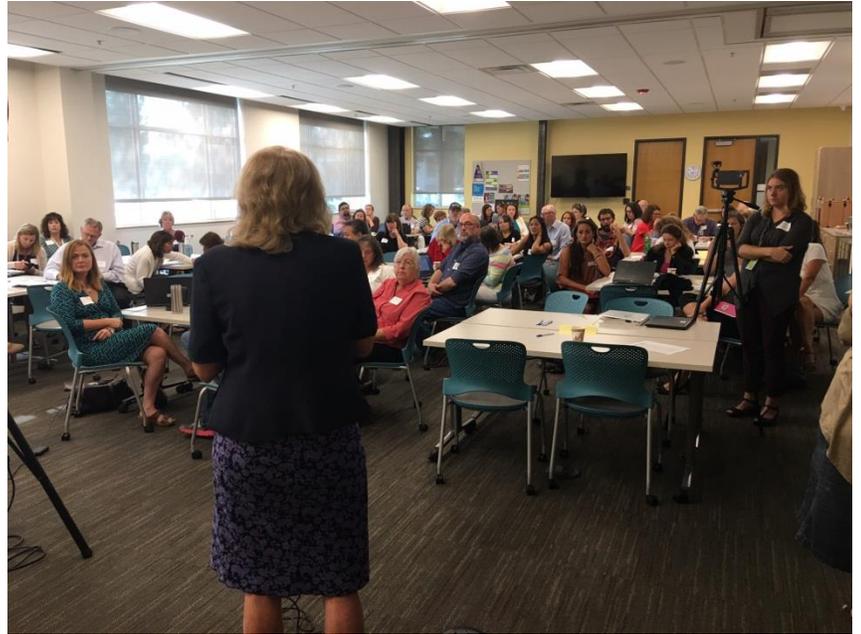
There were also some concerns expressed that, as a community, we are not necessarily good at **working across our complex systems** currently.

A perspective was also shared that we should work to collectively address **geographic concerns** (for example, in mountain communities) around available services and funding priorities.

Suggestions and Potential Solutions

Better Coordination and Communication

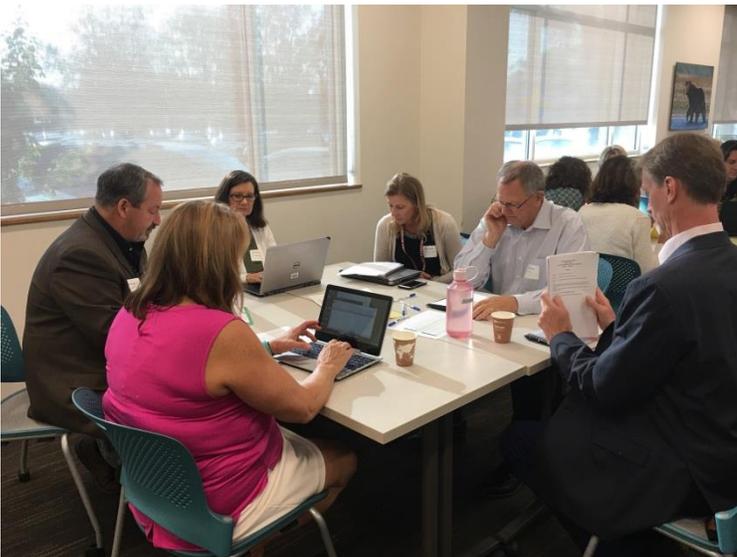
Work collaboratively across the community on a coordinated communication plan and public awareness campaigns, including the creation of messaging that de-stigmatizes the supports we collectively provide and helps boost awareness around the significant equity gaps that exist. There were suggestions that this issue should be tackled head-on, utilizing data-driven evidence that supports the work we are doing to help address it, and that we should refine our messaging around what it costs to live in Boulder County and how many people are unable to do so. Some of this messaging could be disseminated through the board members of many of our organizations.



Facilitate more coordinated services with each other, and the notion that leveraging coordination and integration will boost our collective ability to serve our community during leaner times.

Develop better ways to communicate with the county and municipalities around immediate needs.

Continued and Enhanced Collaboration



Continue these conversations in a proactive manner, potentially on a quarterly basis, to collectively understand how prioritizing certain areas over others will lead to reductions in some supports and potentially produce other impacts on how resources are distributed. Continue to do more advanced planning. Come up with contingency plans as a group to address cuts when and if they appear. Also, potentially seek to engage the broader community, foundations, and businesses in these conversations.

This was also presented as a need for the county and municipalities to continue to engage with community providers when there is a *specific issue* that needs to be addressed. This could include engaging the group around workforce support reductions or another major issue to determine a collective response.

The voices of a full range of community members should be elevated in policy discussions, and we should consider other supports we can provide these community members to help them participate.

Pursue greater collaboration and consolidation among agencies, utilizing lean process improvements to evaluate programs and services to ensure they're meeting the needs of our community and that our agencies are as efficient and effective as possible.

Explore and connect the dots between the interplay of the concerns that came up in the forum, and how they work together to exacerbate each other.

Develop shared metrics to collectively measure the outcomes we are generating in our work together, particularly as funding changes are being considered at the federal and state levels.

Boost data integration and sharing across and between our organizations.

Get together in celebration (i.e. not just in crisis).

Advocacy

Pursue more local control and flexibility with the resources we have available so that decisions around key supports are made in closer proximity to where those supports are needed. Another suggestion included ensuring that initiatives around local tax revenues are constructed in ways that make them flexible and better able to adapt to local needs as they are determined.

The community as a whole should come together to develop policies and initiatives with a unified voice and with language that is relatable, i.e. use of messaging that is more empowering for our residents and more reflective of compassion.

Collectively advocate against cuts to the Affordable Care Act and against reductions in subsidies for those who are currently in the Colorado Health Insurance Exchange (Connect for Health Colorado).

Collectively advocate for additional federal resources to help treat the opioid epidemic impacting our community and foster dialogue in our community on the issue.

Support the **Worthy Cause tax extension** question on the November 2017 ballot.

Support the **Boulder County Regional Affordable Housing Plan** which creates a goal for affordable housing creation by the year 2035.

Create a plan to support employers in keeping DACA young people employed in the community.

Help funders understand that current budget levels only allow us to do so much and stretching beyond this during leaner times can be very difficult.

Pursuit of New Opportunities

Think outside the box in pursuit of funding supports and more creative partnerships from



be

the

business community.

Consider ideas like universal home visitation to help reach people earlier and prevent deeper problems or crisis down the road and better stabilize families.

From the Directors: Next Steps

As we indicated during the forum, we are committed to continuing these conversations, and the perspectives we heard in the table discussions and reports that followed will help inform how we do that in the coming months. Please look for additional communications from us on this in the months ahead.

We welcome additional feedback from you, as well. Please feel free to share your thoughts with us, including questions or comments about this report or elaborations on anything that is stated within it. You can reach us at the email addresses listed below.

We are deeply grateful to be working in collaboration with you. Boulder County is truly fortunate to have a strong network of community and governmental partners who have a common vision of a family-driven, prevention-oriented, and holistic safety net. It is always heartening to be reminded that we are all in this together, through both good times and uncertainty. Thank you for all you do. See you soon.

Frank Alexander, Boulder County Housing and Human Services, falexander@bouldercounty.org

Robin Bohannon, Boulder County Community Services, rbohannon@bouldercounty.org

Jeff Zayach, Boulder County Public Health jzayach@bouldercounty.org

Report produced 09.14.2017