

# Boulder County Public Health 2017 Community Health Assessment

Capacity Assessment

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### **Summary**

The Colorado Health Institute (CHI) assessed the capacity of the Boulder County Public Health Improvement Process (PHIP) to address housing and mental health as part of the 2017 Community Health Assessment conducted by Boulder County Public Health (BCPH).

CHI's analysis finds that current assets and opportunities within the PHIP are high for mental health and low for housing.

The PHIP has an established track record of activities and previous successes in addressing mental health. Its members have deep knowledge and expertise in mental health — from prevention and wellness to care and treatment. The PHIP has several opportunities to support partners already working on these issues as well as to promote mental health and wellness in Boulder County through its leadership and advocacy.

The PHIP does not currently work on housing in an organized way. Most of its members have limited connections with the robust housing policy and advocacy efforts already underway in Boulder County. While there are opportunities for the PHIP to impact housing, specifically through advocacy and community engagement, the PHIP would be a new partner in this space and would require support to build its capacity to meaningfully and effectively participate.

Both issues require authentic community engagement to dispel myths around who is, and is not, impacted by housing and poor mental health. CHI's assessment finds that the PHIP currently has greater capacity to undertake this work in mental health.

CHI found that PHIP partners believe that diverse stakeholders working together with common purpose to achieve shared goals can make lasting change in Boulder County.

Success depends upon the PHIP creating work plans that are succinct and defined, adequately resourced, able to be measured and embedded in broader discussions about values and what truly impacts health in Boulder County.

### **Assessment Framework and Methods**

CHI's capacity assessment identified assets and opportunities for the PHIP to improve housing and mental health in Boulder County in the next five years, categorized as "low" or "high".

Themes explored through the assessment included: identifying partner activities in both areas and understanding critical success factors; capturing needs and opportunities for engaging in PHIP activities; and environmental factors, such as funding and politics.

PHIP activities include: legislative policy and advocacy, organizational policy and systems change, interagency coordination and alignment, community engagement, prevention/population-based approaches and data resources.

CHI assessed capacity through key informant interviews and existing materials. CHI conducted key informant interviews with 11 PHIP stakeholders, primarily members of the Executive Steering Committee, between August and September 2017. Quotes from respondents are included throughout this report. CHI also reviewed existing materials summarizing current Boulder County efforts and activities in housing and mental health that were prepared by BCPH's community assessment team.

## **Mental Health**

### **PHIP Assets: High**

The PHIP has considerable knowledge and expertise in mental health issues impacting Boulder County residents. Members see mental health as “fundamental to overall health and wellbeing,” as one respondent said. Members understand the connection between mental health and the social determinants of health.

PHIP members, through Boulder County's previous five-year health improvement plan, already have defined ways that they can make an impact together in this area. Members worked together on county-wide mental health initiatives, such as promoting Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) to combat stigma.

PHIP members have developed a foundation of trust and collaboration that supports transparent conversations and strategic decision-making on future priorities, authentically aligning efforts across the county and engaging in work that builds community, reduces stress and promotes mental health and wellness for all residents.

While members include funders and grantees, competitors and collaborators, there is a shared belief that the PHIP has done hard work to create this foundation and that nothing should be “off the table” for discussion, as one respondent said. Another respondent echoed a similar sentiment, saying that it is a “reasonable expectation that the PHIP should be talking about these issues” together.

### **PHIP Opportunity: High**

The PHIP has several opportunities to make an impact on mental health.

If adequately resourced, the PHIP can provide community-driven leadership for Boulder County to align and prioritize its mental health efforts. The PHIP can advocate to protect policy gains and call for additional changes as well as engage communities to combat stigma and promote a broad view of mental health and wellness.

**Lead and Prioritize:** Boulder County's many mental health activities and initiatives, from bullying and substance use prevention in schools to MHFA campaigns, are not aligned with one another in a systematic way. Nor does the county have specific, community-identified priorities toward which these efforts work. While respondents mentioned activities happening in cities like Boulder and Longmont, “no one is driving the bus right now around mental health” in Boulder County, one respondent said.

The PHIP can create a space and process for talking about these issues, having established relationships that are “strong and courageous enough,” as mentioned by one respondent and described earlier in these findings.

This work may include setting county-wide priorities around which PHIP members can align their efforts. This wouldn’t necessarily require partners to change their activities. Instead, they could identify how their activities support and align with the priorities. Governance may also include identifying gaps in services as well as duplication of efforts.

It also involves building consensus around shared measurement and metrics for success within Boulder County. One respondent said there is a “wealth of data (on mental health) that is not well-organized or accessible.” A role for the PHIP can be to support a community discussion around “what are the important indicators to focus on and what do we want to measure for impacting mental health,” one respondent said.

Required resources for this work includes skilled facilitation and adequate staffing for these activities. Community partners and residents involved in these efforts also need to be engaged in meaningful activities as full participants.

**Advocacy:** “The more light the PHIP can shine on mental health, the better,” said a respondent.

Boulder County and the PHIP have secured meaningful gains in recent years around expanding insurance coverage and improving access to physical and mental health services, especially for vulnerable or under-resourced communities. Respondents said they are worried that the current policy environment places these gains in peril, and that there is a need to protect the progress that has been made.

Respondents said regulatory advocacy is needed among state agencies, including the Department of Health Care Policy and Financing and the Office of Behavioral Health, as well as at the federal level, to promote client-centered care for people without insurance or those who are covered by public insurance. This advocacy also is needed around opportunities to help providers improve the financial sustainability of their work, they said.

The PHIP can also advocate for greater accessibility to and visibility of mental health services. These services include early intervention and population-based prevention activities to ready-response crisis services and culturally-appropriate treatment available for residents of all income levels. Many respondents felt this range of services needed to be accessible to all community members, and several also cited a need for services that are welcoming to and meet the unique needs of Boulder County residents of color.

**Community Engagement:** The PHIP can create and facilitate community conversations that promote a holistic view of mental health, placing it in the context of overall well-being and its impact on the lives of all residents.

Several respondents said that community leaders are expressing readiness to talk about mental health — from stress and anxiety to “casual” substance use to severe mental illness. But there needs to be a broader community dialogue in which to share and embed these personal testimonies regarding mental health, they said.

The PHIP is well-positioned to break down the stigma that persists around mental health today, and ensure the county has “a spectrum of supports for promoting emotional wellness” available for all residents, according to a respondent.

Respondents identified the valuable resources and expertise among those participating in the PHIP who can speak with authority to many partners, including schools, primary care providers, government agencies, community organizations and policymakers.

### **Housing**

#### **PHIP Assets: Low**

The PHIP has limited involvement in housing activities in Boulder County. This would be a new space for the PHIP, requiring a significant learning curve regarding existing efforts across the county. Most current members have few connections with these activities.

Several respondents felt the PHIP would need training and support to integrate housing into its current processes and to strengthen the understanding of how housing shapes overall health and well-being and its connection to the social determinants of health.

#### **PHIP Opportunity: Low**

The PHIP’s opportunities to impact housing are to advocate with policymakers in partnership with existing efforts and to engage communities about the connection between a community’s health and stable, secure housing for all its members.

**Advocacy:** A number of organizations and regional partners in Boulder County are already leading efforts to address vulnerabilities in housing, including the Boulder County Regional Housing Partnership and the Boulder County 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness. Several respondents see an opportunity to leverage the influence of the PHIP to create political pressure on local city councils, advocacy groups and others to support these existing initiatives. The PHIP can also advocate for alignment of housing efforts between different municipalities in Boulder County.

Other respondents, however, felt the PHIP was not well-positioned to fill this role, given its limited involvement in housing. As a result, they were unsure of what impact the PHIP would have.

**Community Engagement:** Strong, vocal leadership is needed to engage all communities in Boulder County about the connection between stable, safe housing and healthy, resilient communities.

One respondent said that this discussion needs to raise awareness of the need for “everyone being able to afford to live in the community where they want to live and serve,” from single adults and young families to seniors aging in place.

This work involves not just education, but, according to several respondents, conversations about values. Several respondents expressed concern that not all communities in Boulder County are ready for this conversation. Others felt that PHIP members would need to be more skilled in framing these positions, requiring additional support and guidance in developing messages.

### **Conclusion**

Making an impact on housing or mental health in Boulder County will need multiple voices with different views working together in support of common goals.

The PHIP does this work today.

Moving to the next step will require a decision about whether to leverage the PHIP’s high capacity in mental health or to build up its low capacity in housing.