

Belonging Colorado Initiative

Stories From Year One

COMMUNITY-BASED GRANTEES



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Pueblo Food Project



Colorado Mountain Club,
ViVe Wellness



Homies Unidos



Chaffee County Public Health



Museo de las Americas

Introduction

The United States is becoming increasingly polarized, and Americans are connecting with each other less, especially across differences. While most Americans (72%) agree that we have a responsibility to connect with people who are different from us, few feel they have the opportunity to do so.¹

More and more people are deciding that division isn't inevitable and are working to build bridges across the differences that keep us apart.² This kind of bridge-building is central to creating communities where everyone belongs.³

Belonging is a human need. It is associated with better physical and mental health, increased trust in neighbors and local government, more openness to diversity, less fear of demographic change, and greater satisfaction with U.S. democracy.⁴

In Colorado, 14 community-based organizations spent the past year learning how to bridge across differences and what it takes to foster belonging. They found that through intentional programming, people started to form deeper relationships and build trust across differences.

Key Definitions

Belonging isn't just about feeling included. It's about creating communities where all people feel seen, connected, and valued.

Bridging helps people connect across lines of difference and work together toward shared goals. Bridging is a key pillar to creating a culture of belonging.

Learn more at
belongingcolorado.com

About Belonging Colorado

Belonging Colorado is a bold effort that brings people together in new ways and aims to grow resilience across our state by expanding the sense of who belongs in Colorado. This initiative, housed at The Denver Foundation, invests in ideas for building connections across lines of difference — racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, political, age, and more.

The initiative has launched three activities to date:

Community-Based Grants

(Launched in Fall 2024): Supporting community-based organizations in implementing high-quality bridging efforts and programs across the state.

Leadership Networks

(Launched in June 2025): Training leaders and building their capacity for bridging and belonging work.

Social Entrepreneurs

(Launched in early 2026): Partnering with innovators to launch bold, scalable ideas that connect Coloradans across divides.

In 2024, the initiative funded 14 community-based grantees to implement bridge-building projects. This report assesses these grantees' program reach from the first year of implementation, early markers of impact, and next steps for the initiative.

Figure 1. Community-Based Grantee Locations



Community-based grantees and their projects

ORGANIZATION	PROJECT TITLE	OVERVIEW
African Leadership Group	Cultural Passport and Bridging Differences	Bringing together African and African American communities.
CASA of the 7th Judicial District	The Village on San Juan	Creating supportive housing that bridges young adults and seniors.
Chaffee County Public Health	We Are Chaffee's Future	Bridging generations through murals and shared stories.
City of Steamboat Springs	Community Deliberation and Shared Learning	Tackling the city's housing affordability crisis through dialogue and deliberation.
Commún	Bridging Cultures, Building Belonging	Hosting gatherings for residents of Southwest Denver and beyond that center joy, shared humanity, and community voice.
Colorado Mountain Club, ViVe Wellness	Outdoor Unidos	Connecting the broader community through access to the outdoors.
Eagle Valley Community Foundation and Mountain Pride Collaborative	Bridging, Understanding, and Finding Shared Identities through Food and Cultural Exchange	Building bridges through food, cultural exchange, cooking classes, storytelling, and potlucks.
Fort Lewis College Foundation	Founding the Four Corners Bridging Institute	Creating an interactive exhibition and a series of learning communities on the college's legacy as a federal Indian boarding school.
Homies Unidos	Beyond Boards: Empowering Youth	Supporting unity between youth populations through violence prevention and intervention, leadership development, mental health support, cultural empowerment, and creative expression.
Iliff School of Theology	Belonging Colorado	Hosting dialogue-driven initiatives that heal divides across race, politics, and religion.
Museo de las Americas	Intercambio: Building Language Skills and Community Through Art	Building belonging among Denver communities through language exchange, art workshops, and community projects.
Pueblo Food Project	Nourishing Connections	Connecting youth and elders in cooking, gardening, and food workshops that celebrate Pueblo's unique food culture.
Southeastern Developmental Services, Inc.	Community Garden	Growing inclusion and opportunity through a community garden that brings together people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and local residents.
TEENS, Inc.	Outdoor Belonging Project	Bridging urban and rural divides through outdoor leadership, skill-building, and team-based activities for 7th through 9th graders.

By the Numbers

Nearly 30 individuals across the 14 community-based organizations completed an eight-week training on bridging and belonging skills before implementing their programs.

Grantees most commonly bridged across age, race and ethnicity, country of origin, and language divides in their communities.

Collectively, community-based grantees reached over 2,500 Coloradans of various ages, races and ethnicities, and genders. Grantee events ranged from intensive multiday experiences to one-time community gatherings.

Type and Number of Events:



Intensive multiday events

(such as camping trips or retreats)

13

173

Recurring sessions or events with consistent participants

(such as working groups)



Recurring sessions or events that may reach both consistent and new participants

(such as weekly cooking classes or potlucks)

37



92

One-time events

(such as block parties or community celebrations)



Early Evidence of Impact

After the first year of a two-year grant cycle, programs have already shown early markers of success, not just in data, but in the stories grantees tell about what changed in their communities.

Improved knowledge and skills. The Greater Good Science Center (GGSC) provided an eight-week training to the 14 community-based grantees in fall 2024, covering concepts from its Bridging Differences Playbook. Throughout the year, GGSC also provided ongoing technical assistance. Following the training, grantees reported statistically significant increases in their knowledge, skills, and strategies for bridging compared with before the training. A year later, 100% of those surveyed reported they understood the concept of bridging and belonging and felt confident in their skills to help build bridges, suggesting that the training and technical assistance had lasting impacts.



TEENS, Inc.

Bridging Skills

The heart of bridging is trying to understand someone else's perspective, even if it's not your own. The goal isn't to always agree or find common ground — it's to recognize our shared humanity so that we may have constructive dialogue.

GGSC's Bridging Differences Playbook describes 14 evidence-based bridging skills and strategies. They include intrapersonal (skills to practice on your own), interpersonal (skills to practice with others), and intergroup skills (strategies for bringing people together).

Intrapersonal.

Assume good intentions; practice mindfulness; expand your activities, expand your views; seek counter-stereotypical information; focus on individuality, not group identity.

Interpersonal.

Listen with compassion; put people before politics; perspective taking and giving; find shared identities; understand values; try self-distancing.

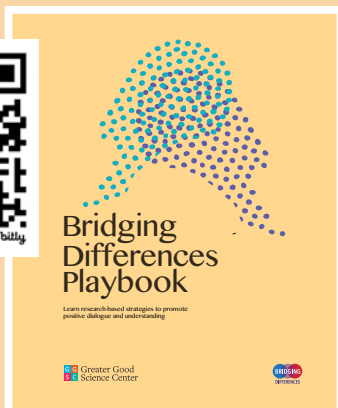
Intergroup.

Create the conditions for contact; identify common goals; focus on solutions, not identities.

These skills are not meant to constitute a formal curriculum, but rather a set of flexible principles that people can adapt and apply in various settings.



Download
the Playbook
[colo.health/
BridgDif](https://colo.health/BridgDif)



Bridging skills in practice.

Grantees incorporated numerous bridging concepts into their projects, with individual grantees introducing at least three and up to nine bridging skills. The most commonly adopted practices included compassionate listening, identifying common goals, finding shared identities, understanding values, and focusing on individuality rather than group identity. Programs put these concepts into practice through activities, dialogue, and storytelling centered on vulnerability, authenticity, and shared humanity.

One grantee described an activity that encouraged participants to focus on individuality rather than group identity:

“We had one very successful activity that our Arabic-speaking organizer made up. One person would start by holding onto the end of a ball of yarn and share a statement about something they like or an experience they’ve had. Anyone who shares that like or experience gets the yarn ball passed to them to hold onto a section of it. At the end, it created a web connecting participants. The purpose of the activity was to put the bridging skill of ‘focusing on individuality, not group identity’ into practice. Then the group went through the process of trying to untangle themselves.”

One grantee described how cooking became an unexpected space for honest conversation:

“Cooking naturally slows down conversation. Being face to face versus shoulder to shoulder creates a different space in conversation. You aren’t as in the other person’s space, so it gives a buffer to have more honest conversations while not having to look someone in the eye. We practice nonjudgmental listening and responding with curiosity. There was a lot of mutual respect and emotional safety that was built over a few classes. People are having conversations that they never would have had otherwise.”

One program found an unexpected way to help youth see past stereotypes:

“We used the Wander app in VR to allow youth to go around the world and explore different cultures. They had to complete a worksheet detailing what they saw, what the people looked like, what they were doing, etc. This exercise helps with storytelling about different cultures and identifying shared experiences.”

Positive cross-group interactions.

Grantees observed an increase in the quality of cross-group interactions throughout their programs. In fact, grantees saw positive change in participants’ confidence in connecting with people different from them and feeling welcomed by those who are different from them.

One person from a program bridging across age (youth and seniors) described a moment that captures what belonging can look like when it quietly takes hold:

“In the first cohort there was a senior who usually sat with two parents and their teenage son. At the end of the first cohort, they both made comments to me about how much they valued one another. So the 80-year-old woman was like, ‘I want to go live at their house, they’re the coolest family,’ and the family said, ‘We want to adopt her as our abuela.’”

Grantees have also challenged the notion that cross-group interactions need to feel forced, and bridging can be enjoyable:

“Hopefully participants left with not only recipes, but creating relationships and cultivating curiosity in one another. Bridging can be such a joyful experience. It doesn’t have to feel forced.”



From top:
Museo de las Americas,
CASA of the 7th Judicial District,
Chaffee County Public Health.



These positive cross-group interactions, over time, create more welcoming communities where people feel they belong. One grantee said:

“One positive experience with another group is just a positive experience, but positive experiences over time with the same group is belonging. And we’re building that.”

Expanding engagement and ripple effects.

Grantees observed that their programs generated ripple effects, deepening engagement among participants and extending impact into the broader community. One grantee watched something unexpected happen after the program ended:

“From cohort one, there was a participant who wanted to volunteer for cohort two and recruited friends to participate. Others have volunteered in other programs that we offer. People are staying part of the new community they have become a part of. Cohort one participants recruited their networks to cohort two without even being asked — they just naturally wanted to.”

Another grantee described how program participants sustained engagement between sessions and expanded to broader networks by forming their own conversation clubs and book clubs.

Grantees also said the principles of bridging and belonging began influencing their broader organizational work. Some incorporated these concepts into conversations with local elected officials, elevating the importance of investing in initiatives that foster connection across differences.

Finally, several grantees reported that their programs attracted growing interest from external audiences. Local nonprofits, schools, and other community partners reached out to learn more, reflecting growing momentum and widespread interest in bridging and belonging initiatives.



From top: Homies Unidos, City of Steamboat Springs, African Leadership Group.



Eagle Valley
Community
Foundation and
Mountain Pride
Collaborative.

What We've Learned

The initiative's learning and evaluation efforts illuminated lessons learned and opportunities to improve the grant program. As a bold and innovative initiative, taking time to reflect, revise, and refine is essential. Grantees were candid about what worked and what was hard. Those lessons are shaping what comes next.

Going forward, the initiative is considering:

Providing additional technical assistance to support participant recruitment. This could include encouraging grantees to partner with local organizations to reach groups with whom they are not already connected, start recruitment earlier, and use tailored approaches to recruit participants.

Providing best practices for curriculum development. Several grantees struggled to find the right balance of structured and unstructured activities and could have used more guidance.

Exploring methods of capturing ripple effects. Grantee projects reached beyond their participants and into their communities. Learning and evaluation tools may be able to capture these indirect or broader community-level impacts.

At the same time, key aspects of the grant program worked well and should be continued:

Providing technical assistance, training, and workshops. Grantees greatly appreciated the extensive support, expertise, and resources provided. Organizations found these supports beneficial for this grant and in building their internal capacity more generally. The trainings also helped grantees to carry out their programs with fidelity. For instance, the facilitation training helped staff create spaces that encouraged respect, vulnerability, and trusting dialogue between participants.

Offering flexible grant program design. Grantees appreciated that this grant opportunity allowed for innovation, flexibility, and responsiveness to community needs.



What's Next

The Belonging Colorado community-based programs are building momentum toward more welcoming communities where people feel they belong.

After the first year of programming, grantees across the state successfully implemented a diverse set of locally driven approaches to bridging differences. Through experiences such as cooking, art, outdoor activities, and storytelling, these efforts are already generating promising early signs of change, including increased trust and deeper relationships across differences.

As the initiative moves into its second year, grantees are focused on deepening and sustaining this work. All participating organizations expressed interest in continuing their programs beyond the initial grant period. Many are exploring ways to integrate bridge-building activities into existing programs, pursue additional philanthropic support,

and strengthen partnerships with local institutions and community leaders.

At the same time, Belonging Colorado will continue expanding its broader strategy through leadership networks and partnerships with social entrepreneurs developing new, scalable approaches to connection across differences. Together, these efforts aim to grow a statewide ecosystem of organizations and leaders committed to fostering belonging.

The stories from this first year are early, but they are real — an 80-year-old woman who found a new family, youth who saw the world through new eyes, and neighbors who stayed connected after the program ended. This is what belonging looks like when it takes root.

Endnotes

- ¹ More in Common. Social Connection Across Difference in the US. (2023). <https://moreincommonus.com/publication/social-connection-across-difference-in-the-us/>
- ² Greater Good Science Center. Bridging Differences Playbook. https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/images/uploads/Bridging_Differences_Playbook-Final.pdf
- ³ Powell J and Menendian S. The Practice of Bridging. (2024). <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/practice-bridging>
- ⁴ Over Zero and American Immigration Council. The Belonging Barometer: The State of Belonging in America. Revised ed. (2024). <https://www.projectoverzero.org/resources/belongingbarometer>

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