



2023

COMMUNITIES

ENGAGED

INITIATIVE



ENGAGEMENT AND EXTENSION
COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY



Finding That
SOLUTION-SEEKING
Energy



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CSU's Office of Engagement and Extension ensures meaningful access and equal opportunities to participate to individuals whose first language is not English. | Office of Engagement and Extension de CSU garantiza acceso significativo e igualdad de oportunidades para participar a las personas quienes su primer idioma no es el inglés.

<https://col.st/OWMJA>

EQUIPPING COMMUNITIES WITH THE POWER OF *connection*



Emerging leaders in Eagle County take the time to connect and rediscover their community's assets and needs.

Photo courtesy of Glenda Wentworth.

Community conversations in Garfield County brought a variety of residents together to explore their local values and possible projects to strengthen social connections.

Photo courtesy of Judith Alvarez.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Increasing social capital in communities throughout Colorado for a healthier democracy

In 2023, the U.S. Surgeon General issued an [Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community](#), centered on research demonstrating evidence of the devastating impacts individuals and communities face in the midst of an “epidemic of loneliness and isolation.” In a tumultuous time of increasing political polarity, economic inequality, rapidly changing demographics, and social fragmentation, CSU’s Office of Engagement and Extension’s (OEE) Engaged Communities Initiative works to provide antidotes to this challenging epidemic with far-reaching impacts. Our work focuses on bridging social divides, creating welcoming and accessible community engagement opportunities, and collaborative approaches to solving tough community issues.

Our work includes research-based leadership training, storytelling workshops that celebrate our shared regional heritage, and events aimed at fostering community dialogue. These efforts facilitate pro-social connections across diverse groups and provide practical learning opportunities. As a result, we are enhancing local civic capacity, boosting community resilience, promoting equitable and inclusive practices, and empowering sustainable, community-led positive changes.

Though Engaged Community Initiative programs and events offered in 2023 are discussed in this report in greater detail, a snapshot of our work is provided below.

Family Leadership Training Institute (FLTI)

9 cohorts in 7 communities | 78 graduates

Our signature leadership development and civic engagement training consists of approximately 120 hours of class and individual project time and is designed to increase civic participation and promote greater collaboration between individuals, families, institutions, public administrators, and elected officials as they seek strategies to respond to emerging social, health, and economic issues in their communities. In September, our 3-day intensive training yielded 32 new FLTI-certified facilitators throughout the state.

Civic Learning Labs

4 cohorts in 3 communities, 1 statewide | 76 graduates

Our experimental, short term leadership development and civic engagement trainings that are co-created with community organizations provide accessible learning opportunities for emerging leaders and are designed to be responsive to a given community’s unique needs. Civic Learning Labs typically range from 6-12 sessions that are 2-3 hours each.

Rural Action Project (RAP)

10 Rural Communities | 9 Community-Driven Projects

In partnership with CSU’s [Center for Public Deliberation](#), OEE collaborated with 10 rural communities to pilot the RAP initiative in 2023. RAP is a 3-part community conversation series that culminates in a collaborative project selected and implemented by participating community members.

OUR TEAM

Under the supervision of CSU Extension’s Community Development Director, **Patti Schmitt**, this team of State and Regional Extension Specialists are strengthening Colorado communities through collaborative, accessible, and meaningful community engagement activities.



PATTI SCHMITT
Community Development Director
Campus



ALIRIA BELLO
State Extension Specialist
Campus



HEATHER MEYER
State Extension Specialist
Campus



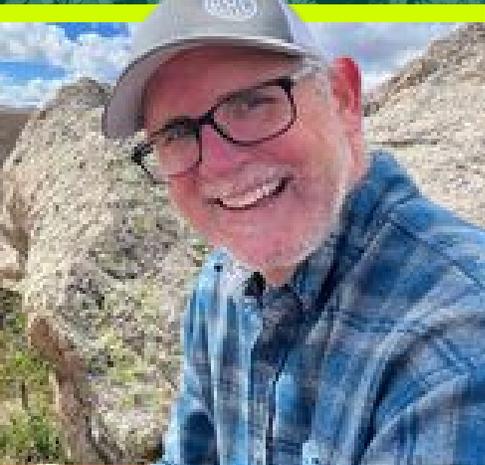
ALICE DONG
Regional Extension Specialist
Eastern Region



JEFF ENGELL
Regional Extension Specialist
Western Region



STEPHEN LAUER
Regional Extension Specialist
Southern Region



WILLIE WILKINS
Regional Extension Specialist
Mountain Region



CONTEXT EXPERT

noun:

People with lived experience of one or more certain situations, including children and youth. They know about issues from an applied, experiential viewpoint.

People living in democratic societies have a right to a direct and meaningful voice about issues and services that affect them.

– Lasker & Weiss, 2003

OVERVIEW & PURPOSE

Historically, public decision-makers, formal leaders, and researchers have both overtly and inadvertently excluded input and participation of individuals and groups with lived experience relevant to the issues at stake. This includes people and groups with traditionally marginalized identities, including people of color, immigrants/refugees, individuals with lower socioeconomic status, limited English proficiency, and/or different abilities, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, and more.

This has been to the detriment of our communities, as research demonstrates including people with lived experience throughout research and/or policy-making processes increases the likelihood of creating relevant and meaningful change.

Our leadership development programming seeks to change this trend; providing accessible, relevant, and meaningful opportunities that work for them to attend. In addition to learning new skills and becoming more savvy about civics, participants in the Family Leadership Training Institute and our Civic Learning Labs demonstrate greater self-esteem, self-efficacy, and improvements in their interpersonal relationships upon finishing their programs. Additionally, our program demystifies the complexities of local systems and governments through bridging efforts that include bringing local experts and elected officials to the learning environments in which they have built trust and belonging with other emerging leaders.

AFFORDABLE



Cost is not a barrier for anyone who wishes to grow at FLTI. Full tuition scholarships are provided to all accepted participants.

CHILD FRIENDLY



Children are welcome at FLTI! Childcare is either provided on-site or via childcare stipend depending on the needs of each cohort.

LANGUAGE JUSTICE



As resources permit, simultaneous interpretation is provided for participants with Limited English Proficiency.

SHARED MEALS



Shared meals at each session foster a sense of connection and belonging between participants, staff, and guest speakers.

Removing common barriers to participation is key for creating accessible and inclusive opportunities for life-long learning.

The hard part [of public policy-making] is recognizing multiple truths exist...sitting with that complication and listening to directly impacted people - that's the work.

When we listen to each other, when we share those stories, that ultimately leads to better policies.

— Julie Gonzales Colorado State Senator, Dist. 34



FAMILY LEADERSHIP TRAINING INSTITUTE

The Family Leadership Training Institute of Colorado (FLTI) is a nonpartisan, multi-sector, and community-driven collaborative that seeks to bridge the gaps that often exist between community members and their local decision makers, ensuring local voices are not only heard, but engaged in co-creating healthy, thriving communities for all Coloradans.

Since 2008, FLTI of Colorado has partnered with community organizations and local CSU Extension offices to provide accessible leadership development opportunities. The program uses the nationally renowned [Parent Leadership Training Institute](#) (PLTI) curriculum and a proven implementation model that has proven effective across the country for over 30 years.

FLTI's signature, 20-session training series is designed to increase civic participation and promote greater collaboration between individuals, families, institutions, public administrators, and elected officials as they seek strategies to respond to emerging social, health, and economic issues in their communities.



Group photo of the 2023 FLTI Facilitator Certification Training candidates and the training team at the end of their three days together. Photo courtesy of Heather Meyer.

FLTI OF COLORADO TRAINING OVERVIEW

Session 1: Day Long Retreat

Explores social identities, power & oppression, cultural norms.

Phase I: 10 Sessions

Personal development, leadership skills, and social networks.

Phase II: 10 Sessions

Government structures and processes, connecting with local officials.

Civic Project

Each participant designs and implements a project addressing a local issue of their choice.

FLTI is the best class I have ever had, it helped me dig deep into my skills and empowered me to use my voice to help my community. I learned I could show up by being myself, being honest and knowing my classmates were always supportive.

– 2023 FLTI graduate



FLTI FACILITATOR CERTIFICATION TRAINING

32
new facilitators
were certified by FLTI!

Candidates from 10 different communities in Colorado attended a 3-day intensive training to earn this credential.

Accessible Professional Development

In keeping with the land-grant heritage of Colorado State University, FLTI of Colorado strives to provide our Facilitator Certification Training in a manner that reduces barriers to quality professional development experiences.

This three-day intensive training experience provides foundational understanding of the values, impacts, and facilitation methods associated with the PLTI curriculum. The training is offered at no cost to attendees, opening doors for emerging community leaders to gain credentials that often lead to their facilitation of other community groups in addition to FLTI.

All participants receive facilitation coaching with an experienced mentor as they prepare their assigned practice sessions, along with group and individual feedback regarding their performances.



Above: Candidates learn to utilize strong listening skills for times they may be asked to summarize community input. Photo courtesy of Armando Rangel.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

FLTI of Boulder County - Lafayette

FLTI of Lafayette's class of 2023 was made possible through the partnerships between Sister Carmen Community Center, Boulder County Government, and the Colorado State University Office of Engagement and Extension.

The 2023 class had 6 graduates and was the 6th cohort from Lafayette since 2017.

A total of 114 people have graduated from FLTI of Boulder County - Lafayette.



FLTI of Boulder County - Lafayette's 2023 cohort of family leaders at their Day at the Capitol event. Photo courtesy of Julie Pillar.

COHORT DEMOGRAPHICS

GENDER



RACE/ETHNICITY



representation of Hispanic/Latine persons in this cohort was greater than that of the general population

INCOME



In addition to attending over 20 intensive training sessions, all FLTI graduates implement and design a personal civic project that addresses any community issue of their choosing. The civic projects designed by FLTI of Boulder County - Lafayette's class of 2023 graduates often addressed multiple local concerns*, as illustrated below.

17% Environmental Health

50% Community Resources & Human Services

30% Empowerment & Support Services

50% Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

** Totals are greater than 100% because most projects fit into more than one category*

FLTI of Boulder County - Longmont

FLTI of Boulder County-Longmont’s class of 2023 was made possible through the partnerships between The OUR Center, Colorado State University Office of Engagement and Extension, and a grant from the USDA’s Children, Families, and Youth at Risk (CYFAR) program.

The 2023 class had 9 adult and 5 youth graduates and was the 3rd cohort from Longmont since 2018.

A total of 35 people have graduated from FLTI of Boulder County - Longmont.



In addition to attending over 20 intensive training sessions, all FLTI graduates implement and design a personal civic project that addresses any community issue of their choosing. The civic projects designed by FLTI of Boulder County - Lafayette’s class of 2023 graduates often addressed multiple local concerns*, as illustrated below.

56% Community Resources & Human Services

44% Advocacy & Community Education

33% Economic Development

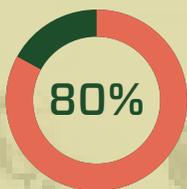
33% Empowerment & Support Services

The FLTI of Boulder County - Longmont’s class of 2023 participated in a Day at the Capitol experience shared with FLTI of SW Denver and FLTI of Jefferson County. Photo courtesy of Lonnie Silva-Garcia.

** Totals are greater than 100% because most projects fit into more than one category*

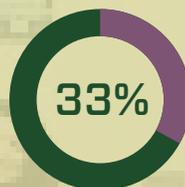
COHORT DEMOGRAPHICS

GENDER



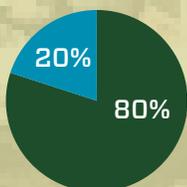
self-identified as women

EDUCATION



of adult participants reported their highest educational attainment as "some college or post-secondary training"

RACE/ETHNICITY



representation of Hispanic and Latine persons in this cohort was greater than that of the general population

■ Hispanic/Latine ■ White, non-Hispanic

AGES

youth participants ranged in ages from

12-15

adult participants ranged in ages from

27-64

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

FLTI of Denver (Southwest)

FLTI of Southwest Denver's class of 2023 was made possible through the partnerships between Lifespan Local and various Denver organizations. Facilities for classes and events were provided by Denver Indian Center. Interpretation for the classes was provided by Community Language Cooperative. Childcare was provided by Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition (CSPC).

The 2022–2023 class had 11 graduates and was the 4th cohort* from Southwest Denver since 2019.

A total of 52 adults* have graduated from FLTI of Southwest Denver.

COHORT DEMOGRAPHICS

GENDER



RACE/ETHNICITY



representation of minoritized racial/ethnic identities in this cohort was greater than that of the general population

INCOME



Above: FLTI of Southwest Denver's 2023 cohort of family leaders with facilitators, site coordinator, and interpreters. Photo courtesy of Lifespan Local.

In addition to attending over 20 intensive training sessions, all FLTI graduates implement and design a personal civic project that addresses any community issue of their choosing. The civic projects designed by FLTI of SW Denver's class of 2023 graduates often addressed multiple local concerns**, as illustrated below.

50% Advocacy & Community Education

60% Community Resources & Human Services

70% Empowerment & Support Services

30% Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

*20-Week FLTI cohorts; there has also been one 10-week youth FLTI cohort at SW Denver.

**Totals are greater than 100% because most projects fit into more than one category

FLTI of Eagle County

FLTI of Eagle County's class of 2023 was made possible through the partnerships between Eagle County Government, Early Childhood Partners, Eagle County School District, and Vail Valley Cares. Additionally, facilities for classes and events were provided by Colorado Mountain College and Miller Ranch Community Center.

The 2023 class had 13 graduates and was the 10th 20-week cohort from Eagle County since 2013.

A total of 166 people have graduated from FLTI of Eagle County.

Right: FLTI of Eagle County's 2023 cohort of family leaders take a group photo with their facilitators. Photo courtesy of Glenda Wentworth

"I thought that to be a leader you must be at the political level or work for an organization, but at FLTI... I was able to internalize and feel more comfortable saying that I am a family leader in this community.

*– Dani Rodriguez
FLTI of Eagle County 2022 graduate*



COHORT DEMOGRAPHICS

GENDER



RACE/ETHNICITY



representation of minoritized racial/ethnic identities in this cohort was greater than that of the general population

INCOME



CIVIC PROJECTS

In addition to attending over 20 intensive training sessions, all FLTI graduates implement and design a personal civic project that addresses any community issue of their choosing. The civic projects designed by FLTI of Eagle County's class of 2023 graduates often addressed multiple local concerns*, as illustrated below.

15% Advocacy & Community Education

54% Community Resources & Human Services

46% Empowerment & Support Services

23% Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

** Totals are greater than 100% because most projects fit into more than one category*

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

FLTI of Jefferson County

FLTI of Jefferson County's class of 2023 was made possible through the partnerships between Jefferson County Extension and a number of community partners, including grants from the USDA's Children, Families, and Youth at Risk (CYFAR) program and Community Gives Foundation.

Facilities for classes and events were provided by Mountair Christian Church and Vietnamese Central Baptist Church. Interpretation for the classes was provided by Community Language Cooperative.



Above: FLTI of Jefferson County's 2023 cohort of family leaders take a group photo with their facilitators, interpreters, and site coordinator. Photo courtesy of Kim Massey.

The 2023 class had 12 graduates and was the 5th 20-week cohort from Jefferson County since 2018.

A total of 80* people have graduated from FLTI of Jefferson County.

COHORT DEMOGRAPHICS

GENDER



RACE/ETHNICITY



representation of minoritized racial/ethnic identities in this cohort was greater than that of the general population

INCOME



I have absolutely enjoyed watching my peers develop and grow. I have learned that I need to use my voice. I row to lean into discomfort and speak up/out when needed.

— Marcelino Casias, FLTI of Jefferson County 2023

In addition to attending over 20 intensive training sessions, all FLTI graduates implement and design a personal civic project that addresses any community issue of their choosing. The civic projects designed by FLTI of Jefferson County's class of 2023 graduates often addressed multiple local concerns*, as illustrated below.

15% Advocacy & Community Education

50% Community Resources & Human Services

25% Empowerment & Support Services

25% Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Related

*Does not include 41 participants in shorter Civic Learning Labs training series offered in 2022-2023

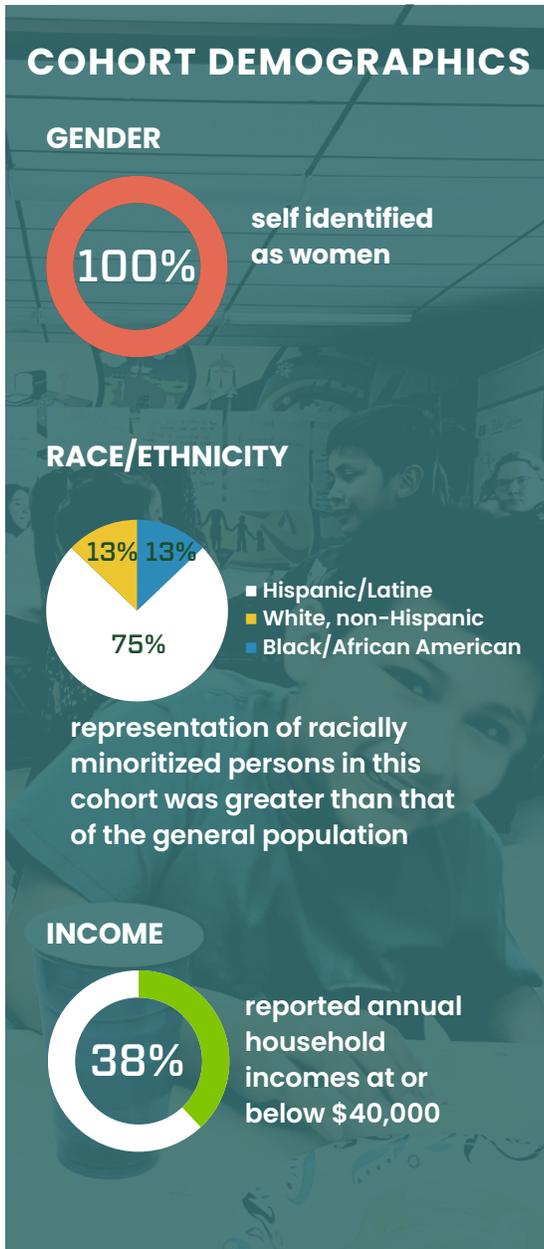
**Totals are greater than 100% because most projects fit into more than one category

FLTI of Morgan County

FLTI of Morgan County's class of 2023 was made possible through the partnerships between Morgan County Family Center, The Colorado Health Foundation, and Colorado State University Office of Engagement and Extension.

The 2022-2023 class had 9 graduates and was the 5th cohort from Morgan County since 2019.

A total of 47 people have graduated from FLTI of Morgan County..



Below: FLTI of Morgan County's 2023 cohort of family leaders take a group photo with their facilitators, interpreters, and site coordinator. Photo courtesy of Letitica Bancroft.



In addition to attending over 20 intensive training sessions, all FLTI graduates implement and design a personal civic project that addresses any community issue of their choosing. The civic projects designed by FLTI of Morgan County's class of 2023 graduates often addressed multiple local concerns*, as illustrated below.

- 56% Advocacy & Community Education**
- 67% Community Resources & Human Services**
- 22% Empowerment & Support Services**
- 33% Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Related**

*Totals are greater than 100% because most projects fit into more than one category

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

FLTI of San Luis Valley

FLTI of San Luis Valley's class of 2023 was made possible through the partnerships between Shooting Stars Cultural and Leadership Center, the Early Childhood Council of San Luis Valley, and a grant from The Colorado Health Foundation. Facilities for classes and events were provided by Shooting Stars Cultural and Leadership Center. Childcare was provided by Shanice Suazo.

The 2022-2023 class had 9 graduates and was the 4th cohort from San Luis Valley since 2019*.



Alamosa Mayor, Ty Coleman, snaps a selfie with family leaders from the 2023 FLTI of San Luis Valley. Photo courtesy of Ty Coleman.

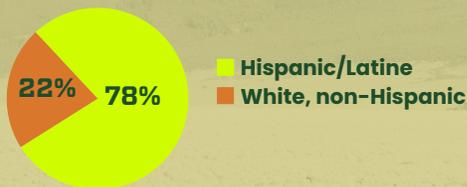
A total of 31 people have graduated from FLTI of San Luis Valley.

COHORT DEMOGRAPHICS

GENDER



RACE/ETHNICITY



representation of minoritized racial/ethnic identities in this cohort was greater than that of the general population

INCOME



CIVIC PROJECTS

In addition to attending over 20 intensive training sessions, all FLTI graduates implement and design a personal civic project that addresses any community issue of their choosing. The civic projects designed by FLTI of San Luis Valley's class of 2023 graduates often addressed multiple local concerns**, as illustrated below.

33% Advocacy & Community Education

67% Community Resources & Human Services

80% Empowerment & Support Services

80% Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Related

**Includes 7 graduates from the original San Luis Valley site in Saguache in 2019*

***Totals are greater than 100% because most projects fit into more than one category*

Day at the Capitol

The FLTI Day at the Capitol event provides a hands-on opportunity for emerging community leaders to witness the legislative process in action and is a key component of the overall training in Colorado.

The day started with participants watching the proceedings in the House and Senate. During lunch, they had the opportunity to engage directly with legislators, using their class-developed elevator pitches to discuss issues important to them. The day ended with participants attending various legislative committee hearings, where they observed the process of public testimony and the work conducted behind the scenes in the legislative chambers.

While the Day at the Capitol event is typically coordinated by State Extension Specialists on our team, with the 2023 launch of the Rural Action Project's inaugural series, coordination for this event was provided by outside consultant and longtime FLTI partner, Angela Engel for three of our communities. Three additional communities attended Day at the Capitol events that were coordinated by their local FLTI Site Coordinators with funding for the events provided by Extension State Specialists.



Above: FLTI participants from the San Luis Valley take a group photo on the Capitol steps. Photo courtesy of Stacey Holden.

What I liked the best about my Day at the Capitol was sitting inside the Senate Chamber and listening to the actual work of our Senators in SB/HB readings, watching them conduct votes and propose amendments.

It was eye-opening how fast the readings, votes, and the counting results go!

Another thing I enjoyed was being able to meet our State Senators, Dylan Roberts and Meghan Lukens. We were able to hear personally that our Senators have been working to address our housing crisis for the past four years.

– Eagle County participant



Above: FLTI participants from Jefferson County engage with House Representative Tammy Story (CO HD-25). Photo courtesy of Kim Massey.

CIVIC LEARNING LABS

While Civic Learning Labs are rooted in the same underlying values and practices of FLTI, they are experimental in nature. The modules feature short-term opportunities for community members to explore community solutions for emerging and complex local challenges.

Extension faculty and community organizations work in partnership to design a customized learning experience for both the target audience and issues.

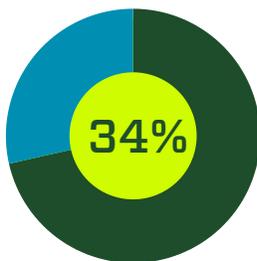
When community partners and Extension faculty have designed the curriculum, the classes are delivered by local facilitators that have already obtained FLTI Facilitation credentials.

With FLTI and Civic Learning Labs combined, 144 individuals from 8 Colorado communities completed their training series in 2023.

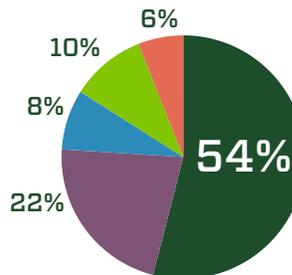
In addition, 3 cohorts of FLTI began their series in Fall 2023, with another 28 participants expected to complete their training in early 2024.



Demographics Across Programs



AGE
more than 1/3 of all participants were youth



RACE/ETHNICITY
more than half of all participants identified as Latine

■ Black ■ Native American ■ Asian
■ Latine ■ White, not-Hispanic



Larimer County Extension

In partnership with La Familia/The Family Center, a 10-week Civic Learning Lab was offered for both adults and youth in 2023. Thirty-one individuals (17 adults, 14 youth) completed this series.

Longmont - The OUR Center

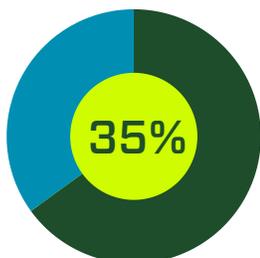
An 8-week Civic Learning Lab focused on healthy boundaries and communication skills for leadership was offered for youth in 2023. Eight youth completed this series.

Statewide - Colorado Department of Early Childhood

A 6-session virtual Civic Learning Lab focused on public speaking, community advocacy, and navigating civic systems was offered for CEDC's Family Voice Council members. Nine adults completed this series.

Jefferson County Extension

In partnership with Jefferson County Public Libraries, an 8-week Civic Learning Lab focused on healthy boundaries and communication skills for leadership was offered for the library's youth interns in 2023. Twenty-eight youth completed this series.



Educational Attainment
more than 1 in 3 adult participants reported their highest level of educational achievement as less than or equal to a High School/GED

Create access.
Move at the "speed of trust."

Watch your communities
transform.

CIVIC IMPACTS

"When the tools of democracy are accessible and understood, leaders [from all walks of life] will engage in civic activities, strengthening the social fabric of our communities."

— Elaine Zimmerman
Founder, Parent Leadership Training Institute

All FLTI participants complete pre- and post-surveys to assess their levels of public participation, civic knowledge, social connectedness, and sense of belonging in their community before and after their training. Gains in civic knowledge shown here are the degree of change between pre- and post-surveys for all 20-week FLTI adult participants in 2023.

In keeping with Elaine Zimmerman's hypothesis above, our evaluation results show that when community members are offered accessible opportunities to gain civic knowledge, develop their personal leadership skills, and increase bridging social capital in their networks, they do indeed engage in their communities at higher levels.

In addition to the gains observed in civic knowledge and community participation, significant increases were observed in scores related to personal empowerment and efficacy, sense of belonging, and connection to the community.



KNOWLEDGE OF WHO
THEIR LOCAL ELECTED
OFFICIALS WERE

**more than
doubled**

**more
than 5x**

AS MANY PARTICIPANTS
SAID THEY KNEW HOW
STATE BUDGETS ARE
MADE AFTER GRADUATING

KNOWLEDGE REGARDING HOW STATE LAWS ARE MADE NEARLY

tripled



more than 3x

AS MANY PARTICIPANTS SAID THEY KNEW WHO THEIR STATE LEGISLATORS WERE AFTER GRADUATING



MEAN SCORES MEASURING PARTICIPANTS' SENSE OF CONNECTION IN THEIR COMMUNITIES INCREASED BY

thirty percent

AFTER FLTI

Post-survey results



25% increase

in participants attending county, school board, or other community meetings



63% increase

in participants speaking publicly and/or making a presentation at a public meeting



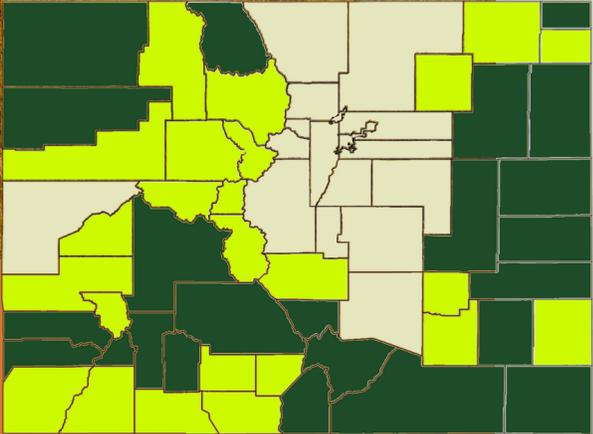
34% increase

in participants using media to advocate or educate regarding a local issue



76% increase

in participants contacting an elected official at local, state, or federal levels



IN COLORADO,
47 of 64 counties
are designated as rural or frontier

Growing social isolation and diminishing trust in public institutions intensifies both disparities and access issues, and these trends are acutely noticed in rural communities. Bringing diverse members of rural communities together for local conversations creates a sense of shared purpose, trust, and connection.

■ Frontier ■ Rural Colorado Rural Health Center, 2024

VIBRANT COMMUNITIES RURAL SPECIALISTS

In 2023, the focus of CSU Extension's Vibrant Communities Rural Specialists' activities encompassed various sectors and programs aimed at fostering community development, economic resilience, and resource accessibility.

Key accomplishments include:

- Collaborated with stakeholders to develop internship proposals, grant applications, and economic development strategies.
- Organized community events such as food deliveries, resource fairs, and economic summits.
- Provided technical assistance, consulting services, and mentorship for students and community organizations.
- Engaged in networking events, conferences, and meetings to build partnerships and share resources across different regions and sectors.

Sectors engaged with Vibrant Communities Rural Specialists ranged from natural resources, tourism, agriculture, community health, education, and economic development. Key partners included County Commissioners and municipal leadership, and nonprofit organizations.

Overall, the activities of CSU Extension's Vibrant Communities Rural Specialists in 2023 demonstrated a holistic approach to community development, encompassing economic, social, and environmental dimensions to create vibrant and resilient rural communities.

On the following pages, each Vibrant Communities Regional Specialist has spotlighted significant areas of achievement.



Vibrant Communities Specialists attended many of the County Fairs in their regions over the Summer of 2023.

40 counties received consultation and programming services from their Vibrant Communities Rural Specialist in 2023.

Over 1,200 new contacts were initiated by Vibrant Communities Rural Specialists in 2023.

Vibrant Communities Rural Specialists collaborated with local partners at over **52** community events making presentations and providing resources to community members.

Southern Region – San Luis Valley Food Needs Assessment

In 2023, Southern Region Vibrant Community Rural Specialist Stephen Lauer continued to support the work of San Luis Valley Local Foods Coalition and local partners to complete a Food Needs Assessment. This project began in late 2022.

Lauer provided guidance around community engagement strategies for the project, supported focus groups in the six participating counties, and developed meaningful findings using data from community focus groups and survey instruments.

The complete San Luis Valley Food Needs Assessment is available at slvlocalfoods.org/cfaa.

In 2024, Lauer remains a key partner in developing a strategic plan with specific goals that will advance a healthy, just, profitable, and sustainable food system in the San Luis Valley.



Above: Extension Regional Specialist, Stephen Lauer, (lower right) took detailed notes at a community focus group in Antonito. Photo courtesy of Stephen Lauer.

Western Region – Building Capacity for Nonprofits

Western Colorado, much like many rural communities, faces challenges in childcare, housing affordability, workforce imbalances, availability of mental health services, and rising costs of living. While no one institution is equipped to deal with the complexity of these issues in total, there are signs of progress in addressing these issues via nonprofits working in conjunction with local governments. Historically, rural nonprofits have been under-resourced and have struggled to create long-term strategic plans due to uncertainties around ongoing funding.

Western Region Vibrant Communities Rural Specialist, Jeff Engell, played a key role in this effort by developing and delivering content; *Business Model Canvas for NonProfits*. Additionally, he provides 1:1 technical assistance as agencies look to refine business models and solicit grant dollars from State and County coffers. In the first year of this effort, participants have been awarded over \$750,000 which is being deployed for program implementation aimed at housing insecurity, mental health services, addiction recovery, decreasing recidivism from incarceration, and workforce training programs.

Eastern Region: Bolstering Agritourism

Yuma County, like the other nine counties in Colorado's Eastern Region, is 100% rural and deeply rooted in agriculture.

Alice Dong worked with Dawn Thilmany, Director of Northwest and Rocky Mountain USDA Regional Food Business Center, to support Yuma agritourism projects and co-presented Colorado State University resources at the Yuma County Agritourism Development Workshop in October 2023, for rural stakeholders.

Additionally, Alice completed a comprehensive review of the new website [ConsiderYumaCounty.com](https://www.consideryumacounty.com) to polish the branding and marketing image for Yuma agritourism. Furthermore, she collaborated with the Yuma Economic Development Corporation and the Colorado Tourism Office to develop a 2024 summer internship program titled "Enhancing Tourism's Economic Impact and Empowering Business Stakeholders in Yuma County." All of these efforts are aimed at increasing the economic impact of rural communities, particularly in the realm of agritourism.



Yuma County is the second highest agricultural producer in Colorado.

Cattle, corn, wheat, hogs, and sunflowers make up the largest sectors of Yuma's ag business, but crops like potatoes, grains like millet and milo, dairy farms, bison herds, and even a camel dairy all call Yuma County their production home.

[YumaCounty.Net](https://www.yumacounty.net)



Credit: Raychel Sanner via Unsplash.com

Mountain Region: Creating Shared Visions for Community Development

Throughout 2023, Mountain Region Vibrant Communities Rural Specialist Willie Wilkins worked on significant community planning projects in Teller and Clear Creek Counties.

In Teller County, Wilkins collaborated with Cripple Creek Parks and Recreation staff to engage diverse stakeholders with their community action planning process.

The work done on our community action plan has reinvigorated the actions towards building a more vibrant, resilient community - not just a place people pass through.

– Teller County resident

Stakeholders from municipal and county government, local schools and businesses, area museums and heritage centers, and CSU Extension came together to create a common vision.

In Clear Creek County, Wilkins worked with County Manager, Brian Bosshardt, County Commissioners, and student interns from CSU's Regional Economic Development Institute (REDI) to analyze the County's current economic development strategies and make recommendations to diversify the area's sources of economic development.



Above: In early 2024, the Clear Creek Economic Development Corporation hosted their inaugural Rural Resilience Economic Development Mixer and Leadership Breakfast, a culmination of the work accomplished in 2023. CSU REDI interns working on the economic diversification studies presented their findings to local stakeholders. Photo courtesy of Credit: Clear Creek EDC.

Northeast Regional Engagement Center (NREC) Connects Extension and Other Local Organizations to New Audiences

Wishing to build upon the momentum of their award-winning work that piloted CSU Extension’s first Spanish-speaking cohort of the Aging Mastery Program in 2022, NREC Partnership and Project Development Manager, Peggy Stoltenberg wanted to find a way to better engage underserved members of her community and connect them to programming that provided both educational resources and increased social connections.

Stoltenberg tapped into CSU's Rural Initiative resources and partnered with local Extension educators and Sterling community organization staff to develop a seven-workshop series called "Taste of Community Resources." These workshops provided residents firsthand experiences with different types of programs. Each workshop was free and included dinner, childcare, and interpretation services, making it accessible to the entire community.

Over 100 community members participated throughout the series, with 63% of survey respondents identifying as people of color, largely of Hispanic and/or Latine backgrounds (51%).

Workshop Presenters

From Garden to Kitchen
CSU Extension Horticulture Educators
 Chelsea Didinger
 Linda Langelo
 Alison O'Connor

Healthy Choices
Community-Based Nutrition Educator
 Mari Casillas
CSU Extension Family & Consumer Sciences Educator, Jaci Wagner

Strengthening Families
CSU Extension Family & Consumer Sciences Area Specialist, Joy Akey
Community Partner

College Access & Preparation
This series featured 2 workshops.
College Access Navigators
 Taylor Jordan & youth peer mentors

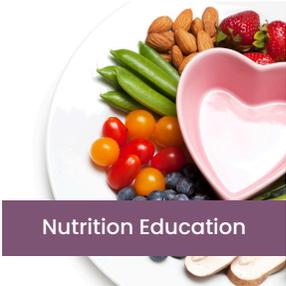
Taste of FLTI
This series featured 2 workshops.
CSU Extension State Community Engagement Specialist, Heather Meyer
FLTI of Morgan County/Morgan County Family Center, Sue Boyett & Letitica Bancroft

WORKSHOP TOPICS

“I loved seeing the community come together and make this happen!”



Sustainable Gardening



Nutrition Education



Strengthening Families



Investing in Civic Capacity



Leadership Development



Workforce Development



College Preparation



RURAL ACTION PROJECT

The Rural Action Project uses the art of storytelling and conversation to strengthen sense of connection and belonging throughout rural communities, spread awareness regarding community activities, future connections, and opportunities for change.

In partnership with CSU's Center for Public Deliberation, OEE curated curriculum and trained emerging and current leaders from 10 different rural communities to host a three-part community conversation series focused on the following topics:

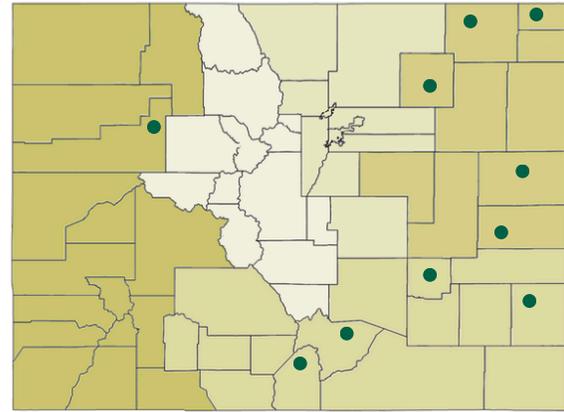
- Identifying Community Needs & Goals
- Telling Community Stories
- Developing Community Projects

Later communities worked collaboratively to identify a project they could come together to complete, building a sense of confidence, trust, and understanding across differences.

"Thanks so much for this opportunity. CSU is really becoming very involved in rural CO and I appreciate that as CSU is more than a college and Extension office in our four counties. Please stay in touch!"

Candace Payne, Executive Director
East Central Council of Governments | Burlington, CO

For more information on the RAP - check out this article on Source! <https://source.colostate.edu/civic-engagement-and-democracy>



Above: Garfield County's Rural Action Project series resulted in community health fairs that provided information, health services, and healthy food booths. Photo Courtesy of Judith Alvarez.

When surveyed about the impact of the Rural Action Project conversation series participating residents reported being more connected, more open-minded to other perspectives, and more motivated to make a difference in their communities.

Because I participated in my community's RAP conversations...

"I met many new people in my community."



"I carefully considered views shared that were different from my own."



"I feel more motivated to act on local issues than before."



Community Projects Developed by Local Residents

In 2023, nine of the ten participating communities advanced a community project; two RAP hosts were geographically close (Garfield County) and consolidated their efforts into one project. Projects fit into three overall categories that emerged as the local residents began to collaborate:

- Community Health & Well-Being
- Cultural Heritage
- Community Development



Community Health & Well-Being

- Health Equity & Local Resource Fairs, Garfield County
- 55+ Club - Forever Young, Sedgwick County



Cultural Heritage

- Cinco de Mayo Kermes, Logan County
- Cheyenne County Heritage Trail, Cheyenne County
- Stories of Our People, Prowers County
- Adobe Clay Oven Exhibition, San Luis Valley



Community Development

- English as a Second Language (ESL) & Textile Production Classes, Morgan County
- Community Tree Planting, Huerfano County
- Digital Communications Board for Burlington Library, Kit Carson County



A Colorado farmer prepares their corn field for the next season.



Right: The RAP Community Project Sterling developed by Logan County residents was a wildly successful, culturally relevant Cinco de Mayo Kermes in which over 600 residents and 100 local vendors attended.

Despite Sterling hosting regular community events where vendors can rent booth space to promote their businesses, many entrepreneurs from the Hispanic community reported this event was the first time they felt able and welcomed to share their services and products with the community due to the event's inclusive design. Photo courtesy of Peggy Stoltenberg.



COLLABORATION IS KEY TO OUR WORK

The work of the Engaged Communities Initiative would not be possible without widespread collaboration and sharing of resources. Partners identified below are those who work directly with OEE to carry out events and programming mentioned in this report, and do not begin to touch on the many local partners that work with our lead organizations in carrying out FLTI, Civic Learning Labs, RAP, and other community engagement events we sponsor.



COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY



OUR PARTNERS

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Laura Barajas
Gabriela Cabrera
Loni Garcia-Silva
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Kim Massey
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Silvana Munro
Karen Nolasco
Claudine Norden
Jacki Paone
Iris Prieto
Deo Perez
David Ramon
Antonio Rangel
Armando Rangel
Pauline Reiber
Gardenia Rios
Tori Sandoval
Adry Santiago
Jason Vitello

Guest Speakers and/or Partners in Programming

Fernando Almanza
Pauline Araujo Agoitia
Javier Avarado Vega
Jose Balderas
Jenna Bannon
John Beltrone
Loren Boyett
Sue Boyett
Rodolfo Cardenas
Dr. Liesel Carr Childers
Amy Chato
Jeff Corn
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Abigail Deval
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Cameron Dole
Paulina Erices
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Lupita Garcia
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Mateo Lozano
Joni Lynch
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Carolyn Paletta
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Nate Peterson
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Cesar Ponce
Khiara Ponce
Alice Pugh
Claudia Quintana
Solangel Ramos
Dani Rodriguez
Chris Romer
Hector Salazar
Sandy Schroeder
Dez Shallenberg
Shianne Silva
Melanie Smith
Michele Stecher
Shanice Suazo
Natalia Sullivan
Beren Tjossem
Dr. Dawn Thilmany
Priscilla Waggoner
Marc Wentworth
David O. Williams
Erik Williams

Elected Officials

Alamosa School District
Assistant Superintendent
Luis Murillo
City of Alamosa Mayor
Ty Coleman
City of Fort Morgan
Councilperson
Brian Urdiales
Colorado Rep. (HD-35)
Lorena Garcia
Colorado Rep. (HD-4)
Serena Gonzales-Gutierrez
Colorado Rep. (HD-26)
Megan Lukens
Colorado Rep. (HD-1)
Javier Mabrey
Colorado Rep. (HD-62)
Matthew Martinez
Colorado Rep. (HD-25)
Tammy Story
Colorado Rep. (HD-57)
Elizabeth Velasco
Colorado Sen. Sonja
Jacquez Lewis (SD-17)
Colorado Sen. (SD-16)
Chris Kolder
Colorado Sen. (SD-8)
Dylan Roberts
Dir. of Legislative Affairs
Attorney General's Office
Jeffrey Reister
Eagle County
Commissioner
Kathy Chandler-Henry
Eagle County
Commissioner
Jeanne McQueeney
Eagle County Commissioner
Matt Scherr
Town of Avon
Mayor/Councilperson
Amy Phillips
Town of Eagle
Councilperson
Janet Bartnik



ENGAGEMENT AND EXTENSION

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de oportunidades para participar a las personas quienes su primer idioma no es el inglés.

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