



## BE HEARD, BE HEALTHY MILE HIGH: WORKING TOWARD HEALTH EQUITY FOR UNDERSERVED COLORADANS

**Deidre Johnson, The Center for African-American Health**

Health care disparities that affect African Americans on a national level are well-documented. Research shows that this community receives lower-quality care and therefore experiences worse health outcomes than white Americans. For the first time, in September 2018, the Colorado Health Access Survey conducted an in-depth examination of health care access and experiences of African-American Coloradans.

As a society, we measure things that are important. And while this first step is a wonderful way of signaling that the African-American community is as important as other populations across the state, it must only be a beginning. If we truly want to move underserved communities toward better health outcomes, we must take seriously and prioritize data collection and analysis within those communities and then use what we learn to work with those communities to close persistent health gaps.

In November 2016, the Center for African American Health — where I have the privilege of serving as CEO and executive director — received a three-year grant to develop a research panel with a sustainable, innovative, comprehensive, and longitudinal methodology for health data collection. In the months that followed, I embarked upon a journey to establish the center as a community platform equipped to offer services ranging from direct provision of evidence-based programming to research and evaluation. My vision was to position the Center as a beacon of excellence in service delivery and as a network partner and systems builder — all with an eye toward achieving health equity for underserved communities. In practice, this means offering culturally responsive health education and outreach that empowers communities to overcome root causes of health problems.

When we set out on this journey — around the same time that I joined a new, vibrant, and inspiring community of leaders working on behalf of children and families across Colorado through the Aspen Institute Colorado Children and Families Health and Human Services Fellowship — we set a handful of goals for what success might look like at both the programmatic and system levels and identified a set of attitudinal and behavioral shifts necessary to realize that success.

If we were successful at the programmatic level, families would view the center as a safe place to seek resources, services, and assistance navigating systems of care; organizations would view the center as a trusted data source and hub to facilitate linkages between communities and service providers; the research panel would play an active role in informing the field, increasing civic engagement, building data collection capacities for communities of color; and we would have developed processes to authentically engage communities to identify and support solutions to issues related to their collective health and well-being.

At the system level, success would mean moving the field toward reimagining an approach to health and human services that is person-centered from start to finish, breaking down silos that make the coupling of services harder, advocating for robust data collection and analysis in our most underserved communities, and shifting the health care approach to one of active prevention as opposed to reactive treatment.

## BeHeardMileHigh



Contact us at  
[BeHeardMileHigh@caahealth.org](mailto:BeHeardMileHigh@caahealth.org)



Since receiving the grant in November 2016, the center has successfully launched and implemented the BeHeardMileHigh community health panel ([www.BeHeardMileHigh.org](http://www.BeHeardMileHigh.org)), which is comprised of more than 1,500 community members representing a rich array of demographic criteria including age, housing status, income, and education. The panel has allowed us to examine trends in health equity and test innovative methods to reach diverse communities — learning along the way that effective and enduring knowledge management cannot be a sterile, one-way communication, but must involve trust, context, and appropriate feedback to community. Communication, transparency, and shared goals are essential to building the trust and relationships necessary for this kind of collaborative endeavor between service providers and communities to flourish. On the capacity-building side, the center was named a network grantee of the Health Equity Advocacy cohort, which is engaged in building individual and collective capacities of organizations and communities across Colorado to advocate for changes that improve health equity.

We have enhanced our direct service footprint over the last two years as well, launching a youth leadership program co-created by young people to address their most pressing needs (in June 2019, we will be taking a team of youth to Uganda to participate in a global youth summit); securing funding for the center's first-ever early childhood programming (offering parent education classes — Strengthening African American Families — for parents of children from birth to age 5); expanding our Living Healthier Together program to include a nutrition curriculum pilot; and becoming a member of the Family Resource Center Association. In September 2018, I received the Health Equity Champion Award from Colorado's Center for Health Progress.

While we are proud of the progress we have made, we recognize the work that still needs to be done — namely, ensuring that the makeup of our BeHeardMileHigh panel is representative of the full diversity of our community and building a referral network to help ensure families are healthy, stable, and connected to resources. To address representation on the panel, we have initiated research and evaluation contracts with community-based organizations like the Family Center/La Familia of Larimer County to offer surveys in Spanish. We have also received funding to better understand the enrollment experience of SNAP beneficiaries across the state in order to inform system improvements.

In addition to tackling those challenges, we look forward to continuing to grow the panel, working with the community to develop a health equity policy agenda, and expanding our direct service portfolio to include additional multigenerational parent education programs in the year ahead.



**Deidre Johnson**  
**CEO and Executive Director**  
**The Center for African-American Health**

*Deidre Johnson is the CEO and executive director of The Center for African-American Health. The Center works toward health equity for the underserved African American community by offering culturally competent health education and outreach that empowers community members to overcome the root causes of health problems, maximize their own individual health, and access health and support services.*