

# Jefferson County Health Alliance - Culture of Connection Action Team Summary of Interviews with Key Connectors in Jefferson County February 26, 2021

## Introduction

In Spring 2020, members and organizations of the Jefferson County Health Alliance convened to discuss ways to foster connection and strengthen collaboration. One strategy determined by the group was to engage in activities that would build a culture of connection. The Jefferson County Health Alliance began to develop an action team to do just this.

During the summer of 2020, a planning group for the Culture of Connection Action Team determined its first step was to understand what a culture of connection is by interviewing “connection champions” in Jefferson County. The following is a summary of the findings from these interviews.

## Methods

Between August and November 2020, members of the Culture of Connection Action Team interviewed the following six leaders building cultures of connection in Jefferson County. The following leaders hold executive positions in organizations, collaboratives, coalitions and support groups. They represent various perspectives within their communities.

- Colleen Owens, Green Mountain High School
- Donna Walker, Jefferson County Public Libraries
- Joel Newton, Edgewater Collective
- Paulina Erices, Jefferson County Public Health/Adelante Network
- Toni Miner, Circle of Parents/Jefferson County Human Services
- Tracy Selph and Sebastian DeTemple, Jeffco Safe Schools Coalition

The Action Team partners developed interview questions that included what characteristics of a connected culture are, why connectedness is important and what it felt like when the community was not connected. A list of the complete interview template is included in Attachment A. Between one and three action team members conducted the interviews by phone and virtual meeting. Each interview took approximately one hour. The interviewers recorded responses to the questions on word documents.

Carroll Mannino of Jeffco Public Libraries analyzed the interview data using qualitative methods. Ms. Mannino did not participate in the action team, the development of the interview tool or conduct any interviews. This afforded an opportunity for an objective review of the data.

## Results

*What is Connectedness? Why is it Important? What is its value?*

Nine themes emerged from the interviewee’s responses to what is connectedness, why is it important and what is its value – safety, trust, time, belonging without judgement, valuing differences, collaboration, personal relationships, listening and empathy.

- Safety. "Without safety, you lock parts of yourself away to literally survive." "[A connected culture] doesn't look at you differently because of a truth that you are sharing."
- Trust. "People understand you're not going anywhere and would do the hard work." "People feel valued and supported." "Acknowledge that you don't always know what is going to happen but you as an individual will still be there." "People must be at the table to make the policies. But, this is a catch 22. To be present, makes people vulnerable. It's very difficult to express your truth and still have privacy."
- Time. "Think long term – building culture takes time and trust. Can't rush things." "Don't rush the connectedness." "Don't rush to evaluate."
- Belonging without judgment. "Feeling you belong; being 100% yourself." "Being in an accepted group reduces vulnerability and builds strength." "People have a need to be social creatures. You can find social acceptance with shared experiences and interests." "Fewer people slip through the cracks [in a connected community]." "Leave your biases at the door - talk with and get to know people. What they look like on paper is not the full story." "We are social beings. Being disconnected from other people is disorienting." "The value of connectedness, is about our humanity, our mental health and our health as a community." "When people are connected, they believe in themselves, build strength and a culture of community."
- Valuing differences. "Lots of learning of how to listen to people who have different backgrounds and experiences." "Appreciation for differences." "Differences are supported." "Allow for differences among a group." "Community members need to feel valued in their experience." "People in the same community have different views." "The beauty is that we are different - can we come together with a common belief?" "Work with divergent values."
- Collaboration. "Cross-sector (biz leaders know community members), cross-cultural, cross-language, cross-background." "People know each other across organizations; open to sharing across organizations." "Let go of ego and [don't] care about getting the credit." "Connect with others working to make the community a better place (agencies, faith community, families)." "Can't do it alone. Work together through problems." "Contact those already doing the work so you know what's getting done." "Opportunities opened doors to serve our needs and another group's needs. Share the service load." "Continue the work of those who built the foundation." "How do we speak with common language and make people feel part of it?" "Common goal and we're all in this together." "We are connected, if we chose to ignore it then we can try to stay ignorant to the changes in other places affect us."
- Personal relationships. "Quality of the connection." "In-person relationship, knowledge of each other based on that (vs. digital world)." "Being in the same room (vs. online during COVID) creates stronger connections; and those connections create a bigger impact." "It isn't the entities - it's the people within them."
- Listening. "Finding a community's, and person's, assets - their experience and talents. Can only be learned by listening." "Find out what the needs are." "Learn to listen." "Focus groups on what the community wants." "Listen, closed mouth to start, open body language and huge heart."
- Empathy. "Recognize the people not just the problem." "Meet people where they are."

### *The Culture that was Inherited*

Interviewees described the culture they inherited or experienced when it was disconnected. They described this culture as the following.

- "Isolated."

- "Didn't reflect reality."
- "Lack of support systems from the community's perspective. People didn't know about support available."
- "Lack of grassroots effort. Agencies were working in the community, but the community wasn't connected."
- "Unprofessional and public demeaning."
- "System design in place was toxic and caused further trauma. Took a change in leadership for people to let go, feel safe and express emotion. Point out that we are not going back."

Interviewees also mentioned:

- "Traditions and rituals that are within communities. Can tell if there is that connectedness and when there is not."
- "People were already asking what was needed, listening, knowing people in the community."

### *Obstacles to Building a Connected Culture*

Three themes emerged as obstacles to building a connected culture - systems, leadership and trust.

- Systems. "Policies look good on paper, but don't work in reality." "Building a system for a piece of paper instead of to function." "Organization blames community for the failure of the system but the system is working how it was designed. Importance of human-centered design." "Organization defends their system instead of acknowledging mistakes." "Moral injury for front line staff - put in the middle of seeing the community struggle and representing a system that does not allow for humanity/flexibility." "Systems that want data. Shift how we look at data - take into account neighborhoods/sub-sets." "Shifts in thinking and technology."
- Leadership. "Leadership/administrators don't see things the same way as the community." "Unsupportive leaders/administrators." "Community members and agencies/organizations live in two different worlds."
- Trust. "Had to open up to hard conversations and receiving hard feedback. The criticism was essential for trust." "Toxicity - and it dissipates at the speed of relationship. Progress moves at the speed of relationship." "Lack of comparison among similar institutions." "Acting like the work was new, but there were people who were doing the work a long time before and felt discredited."

### *How a Connected Culture was Created*

All the interviewees are involved with shifting the culture of their community toward one of connection. Themes that emerged in creating a connected culture which included shifting culture, building relationships, collaborating and engagement and assuring safety.

- Shifting culture. "Policy changes." "Challenging the narrative." "Community must be at the table to make policies."
- Building relationships. "Build on ideas that were already started." "Don't duplicate efforts - know the community in order to make referrals to existing resources." "Jump on opportunities." "Build connections across districts." "Consistency with people and relationships." "Sharing information." "Build the connection - be there and present."
- Collaborating and Engagement (inside and outside the organization). "Collective vision of what the community wants to do together." "Form teams and let them actually do things." "Leaders cast and guard the vision while empowering the team to do it." "Bring together the people who are engaged in

organizations and can further the work." "People can't get around what they can't understand and articulate. If everyone understands what our purpose is, that's how you create engagement." "Build on people's strengths." "Cultivating leadership skills in others that they already have."

- Assuring safety. "What makes the community feel safe and respected?" "Combating fear - feeling connected feels safer." "Spaces where people feel understood and welcome as they are. People need to feel worthy and safe." "Make spaces for people to meet their needs (gathering, business, learning) - the safe 'third place' (after home and work)."

#### *Resources Mentioned By Interviewees*

- Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network - [National School Climate Survey](#)
- Trevor Project - [National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health](#)
- JeffCo Schools - [Make Your Voice Heard Survey](#)
- JeffCo Schools - [Student Engagement Office](#)
- [Margaret Whitley](#) (Writer, Montessori Consultant, Speaker)

### **Discussion**

Communities come in all shapes and sizes. They can be workplaces, schools, businesses, organizations, clubs, neighborhoods, cities or an entire county. While communities are big and small, they are all strengthened with connection between people. Through the Culture of Connection Action Team's interviews with leaders throughout Jefferson County, Colorado, it found a culture of connection brings safety, trust, belonging without judgement, value of differences, collaboration, personal relationships, listening and empathy to a community. Without connection, people feel isolated and unknowledgeable. Furthermore, people describe a disconnected culture with strong words such as toxic, trauma-inducing, unprofessional and demeaning. It was also described as resulting in agencies producing products and services that do not address the realities of people's experiences leading to ineffective and inefficient efforts.

Building a culture of connection takes time and intentionality. It begins with developing relationships built on trust, empathy and safety. The Action Team recognizes the role of past and current trauma and injustices that creates a context for mistrust. This context must be intentionally recognized and addressed to move toward connection and foster empathy and trust. To create a culture of connection, there must also be a focus on creating safety – to create environments in which people can show up as their true selves.

The discussion of connection between people also involves the connection between people and organizations and people in their environment. The interviewees stressed the importance of policy change in creating an environment supportive of connection and that people must be a part of the development of services conducted on their behalf.

Finally, to create a culture of connection requires leadership at all levels – from leaders of organizations to individual community members.

### **Next Steps**

The Culture of Connection Action Team is currently exploring opportunities to foster the culture of connection in the Alliance and throughout Jefferson County. It recognizes barriers to connection include structural, systemic and personal (both between people and within individuals) barriers. It will take the time and intentionality to build on and support existing work, as well as initiate new efforts, to foster safety, trust, belonging without judgement, valuing of differences, collaboration, personal relationships, listening and empathy.

### **Acknowledgements**

#### *Culture of Connection Planning Team:*

- Kelsey Campbell, Jefferson County Public Health Tobacco Prevention Program
- Melanie Mandel, Jefferson County Public Health/Jefferson County Communities That Care
- Pamela Gould, Jefferson County Public Health/Jefferson County Communities That Care
- Reg Cox, Lakewood Connects
- Robyn Lupa, Jefferson County Public Library

#### *Qualitative Analysis:*

Carroll Mannino, Jefferson County Public Library

#### *Jefferson County Connection Champions:*

- Colleen Owens, Green Mountain High School
- Donna Walker, Jefferson County Public Libraries
- Joel Newton, Edgewater Collective
- Paulina Erices, Jefferson County Public Health/Adelante Network
- Toni Miner, Circle of Parents/Jefferson County Human Services
- Tracy Selph and Sebastian DeTemple, Jeffco Safe Schools Coalition

## Appendix A. Interview Questions to Ask Key Connectors

We are part of a growing collaboration of leaders from across the community working together as the **Jefferson County Health Alliance**. Within the Alliance, different leaders are working in subgroups to move the mission of a thriving and connected community forward. Our Subgroup is tasked with helping to build a “Culture of Connection”. Our first step is to better understand what a culture of connection is and develop a list of insights that might move us toward positive change offering thriving and equal access to all across the County.

We identified some leaders who are growing a Culture of Connection in their spheres of influence and **you** came up at the top of the list! We are excited to hear more from you about the vision and history for developing a connected culture in your community. By gathering these stories, we hope to identify trends, better understand the value of connection and build a broader partnership to influence connectedness throughout the county.

1. What are the characteristics of a connected culture?
2. Tell us why connectedness is important in the work you do/community you serve.
3. Describe the culture you inherited with respect to connection.
4. What is different now that makes your community feel connected?
5. How did you get here? How did people align with that vision?
6. What obstacles/pain points did you encounter during your journey of developing a connected culture?
7. Any last words that you'd want to share about the value of connectedness? / Anything else you'd like to share?