



[Home](#) / [Insights](#) / [In Good Health](#)

/ The Connection Between Poverty and Health: A Recap of Symposium Unplugged

# The Connection Between Poverty and Health: A Recap of Symposium Unplugged

Posted: May 10, 2018

By Dara Hessee

As a Senior Program Officer at the Colorado Health Foundation, I am continuously learning how social, environmental and economic circumstances contribute to our overall health. This understanding is vital to the success of the work we do across the state.

Last month, I attended **Poverty's Impact on Colorado's Health**, a Symposium Unplugged event the Foundation hosted in Cañon City, Colorado. Nearly 200 people gathered on the grounds of a former monastery to discuss issues related to the intersection of poverty and health.

What we heard, over the course of the day, was that poverty and health are inextricably connected. That well-being is near impossible without economic opportunity and in the face of systemic obstacles. And that the resiliency of many Coloradans is tested on a daily basis as a result of these challenges.

Our President and CEO Karen McNeil-Miller kicked off the program with the observation that mitigating poverty is inherently linked to our collective effort to improve the health of Coloradans. "For some folks, health is quite within reach. They have all the things they need at their disposal, including the opportunity, to be their healthiest," she said. "But there are many in this state who don't. So, that's who we're focusing our efforts on and talking about today. Being healthy and thinking about health may not rise to the top of the list of things that a person living in poverty can afford to worry about."

Dr. Erik Wallace, of the University of Colorado School of Medicine, talked about how medical students and doctors seldom have their own lived experience related to poverty. As a result, they can miss or underestimate ways in which it affects the health of their patients.

“In seven years of medical education, I learned two things: how to diagnose illness and how to treat illness,” he said. “I truly didn’t get ‘woke’ [to poverty’s influence on health outcomes] until much later.” Today, Dr. Wallace runs the **Poverty Immersion in Colorado Springs (PICO)** program to help instill in medical students an awareness of the interplay between poverty and health.

In her presentation on homelessness and health, medical student Robin Harland explained how poverty and poor health can coexist in an unfortunate cycle. For example, chronic illness, substance abuse and high medical bills are often contributing factors to homelessness. And if an individual is living without stable housing or regular medical care, physical and behavioral health issues are exacerbated. This cause-and-effect relationship between financial health and well-being was underscored elsewhere in the program as well. A participant in an afternoon panel discussion later shared about her personal experience with financial disaster after her spouse suffered a major medical emergency that left him unable to work.

According to the **Colorado Department of Local Affairs**, counties in Colorado with the highest poverty rate are concentrated in the mostly-rural Southern and Southeastern areas of our state. Residents of rural communities also face unique challenges when it comes to accessing health care, which in turn can lead to or worsen financial hardship. Common barriers include scarcity of health services, a lack of trained physicians and the need to travel long distances to receive specialized care. A panel discussion on economic resiliency in Colorado’s rural communities highlighted ways to improve the health of residents through investment in economic development efforts and policies that promote economic mobility.

After lunch, **Michael Patrick MacDonald**, community activist and best-selling author, presented a keynote that highlighted the trauma that can result from living in a neighborhood rife with economic insecurity. Michael grew up in South Boston’s Old Colony Housing Project in the 1970s and ‘80s, which at the time held the distinction of having the highest concentration of white poverty in the U.S. While childhood and family photographs looped in the background, he spoke about a series of tragedies related to poverty, suicide, substance abuse, crime and incarceration that led to the loss of four of his siblings and consumed a generation of his peers. He stressed how important it is to confront personal and community trauma caused by poverty, as well as combat the projection of “othering” created through economic inequality.

The event ended with a panel discussion that brought together a high school student, an early childhood educator, a policy expert and two social service professionals to share both personal experiences related to poverty and stories of impact from their work in the field. These narratives helped put a human face to the many statistics and socioeconomic issues discussed over an information-packed day.

The takeaway from this Symposium Unplugged was clear – among the many recognized social determinants of health, including gender, race, education and ZIP code, among others, the experience of poverty is one of the strongest underlying factors contributing to poor physical and behavioral health outcomes.

We all have a formidable task ahead of us to mitigate poverty and improve how its related barriers are addressed by our policies and health care systems. It will require coordinated planning and investment across the public, private and philanthropic sectors.

Despite these challenges, I am hopeful we can continue to push forward. I am inspired by the passion and commitment of the large and diverse group of attendees that joined the conversation in Cañon City. The more we understand how poverty impacts the health of individuals, families and communities across Colorado, the better positioned we are to create change.

Interested in learning more about this subject? View the **[archived live stream of Symposium Unplugged](#)** and follow the **[#18CHSUnplugged](#)** conversation that took place online alongside the event.

**Topics: [Poverty](#), [Colorado Health Symposium](#)**

## Related



AUG 18, 2016

## **ACTION Makes a Movement.**

**READ MORE**



JUL 21, 2016

## Join us for the 2016 Colorado Health Symposium

**READ MORE**



JUN 23, 2016

## Health is Everyone's Business

**READ MORE**