Pikes Peak Heritage Series celebrates and raises awareness of the natural assets of the Pikes Peak Region.

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El Pomar Foundation launched Pikes Peak Heritage Series in 2015 to celebrate and raise awareness of the natural assets of the Pikes Peak region. The program brings together key organizations, stakeholders and leaders to discuss how the region can best promote its outdoor resources. In Autumn 2019, Pikes Peak Heritage Series, in partnership with Colorado Springs Health Foundation, gathered leaders in the healthcare and outdoor sectors to explore these ideas.

The Pikes Peak Outdoors: Prescriptions for a Healthier Colorado Springs series discussed and explored the relationships among health and wellness, healthcare and the outdoor industry. The series used the Colorado Outdoor Rx Report, published in 2018 by the Colorado Outdoor Recreation Industry Office (OREC), as a guide. The first session of this series explored the report, highlighting the importance of community access to the outdoors, the role employers can play in facilitating outdoor engagement for the health benefits of employees, and the recent trend of doctors “prescribing” time outdoors for patient wellness.

The second session was cancelled due to weather, but the session’s speakers provided content available in this document around the role of the healthcare industry in encouraging outdoor engagement. The current healthcare system does not incentivize or promote the outdoors as a key part of patient care and overall health. As studies and conversations about the health benefits of the outdoors continue there is a possibility this trend will change, but for now traditional patient care models do not incorporate the outdoors.

The final event in the series examined Colorado Springs’ history as a health and wellness retreat at the foot of Pikes Peak and how this reputation further solidified the importance of the relationship between health and the outdoors. Since Colorado Springs’ founding in 1871, parks and open space have been an integral feature of the city. Access to green spaces and outdoor recreation positively affects health through stress relief, improved mental health and focus and reduced anxiety and depression. A panel discussion explored tangible suggestions to increase outdoor equity and access for all populations to enjoy these health benefits.
Dear Colleague,

Pikes Peak Heritage Series, a program of El Pomar Foundation, presented the *Pikes Peak Outdoors: Prescriptions for a Healthier Colorado Springs* in the fall of 2019. The program hosted speakers and panelists who discussed the relationships between health, healthcare and the outdoors. Based on the insights shared at these events, I am pleased to present this white paper.

Since 2015, Pikes Peak Heritage Series has sought to celebrate and raise awareness of the natural assets of the Pikes Peak region. Previous events have focused on topics such as wildfires, tourism and the outdoors, and the economic benefits of the outdoor recreation industry. Through this most recent speaker series, co-sponsored by the Colorado Springs Health Foundation, we facilitated discussions around the ways Colorado Springs can capitalize on its history and identity as a healthy place to encourage prosperity and increased outdoor recreation as part of a comprehensive healthcare plan.

This paper intends to share information discussed during our two events, both of which examined the health benefits of nature-based recreation and the ways in which healthcare providers in the Pikes Peak region can encourage outdoor engagement. We hope the information presented here is of use to everyone from outdoor enthusiasts to healthcare industry leaders as we strive to preserve and adapt Colorado Springs’ enduring reputation as a destination for healthy living.

I would first like to thank the Colorado Outdoor Recreation Industry Office for publishing the *Outdoor Rx Report*, which served as both the impetus for this speaker series and a framework for our discussions. I would also like to thank the speakers who took time to prepare and present. Finally, I would like to single out El Pomar Foundation staff who work on Pikes Peak Heritages Series, as they orchestrated these events and wrote this white paper.

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Sincerely,

R. Thayer Tutt Jr.

Vice Chairman and Chief Investment Officer
INTRODUCTION

The Pikes Peak region has always had a reputation for being a healthy place. Indeed, the city of Colorado Springs owes a large part of its foundation to people moving here to be “healthy”— during the 1880s and 1890s, those afflicted with tuberculosis traveled here for the remedy of clear, dry mountain air. To this day, that reputation persists. With nationally recognized parks, biking opportunities and a foot race up a 14,000-foot peak, the region boasts outdoor recreation opportunities that incentivize healthy behavior. Moreover, those incentives seem to work; Colorado had the lowest obesity rate in the country in 2016.

According to the Colorado Outdoor Recreation Industry Office (OREC), Americans spend 90 percent of their time indoors or in a vehicle. The country’s obesity rates have been increasing. Unfortunately, Colorado and the Pikes Peak region are not sheltered from these national trends. While Colorado’s obesity rate is the lowest in the country, it has more than tripled from 6.9 percent in 1990 to 22.3 percent in 2017 (OREC). This statistic does not capture the racial and ethnic disparities in health, where minority residents experience an even lower average measure of health along several metrics.

In 2018, OREC published the Colorado Outdoor Rx Report, which highlights the health benefits of nature-based recreation. The report states that between its fantastic outdoor resources and its progressive Medicaid system, Colorado is uniquely situated to “be at the forefront of achieving better health through its great outdoors.” Outlining a three-pronged approach that includes medical plans for individuals, business culture and environmental action, the report advocates for multiple organizations and systems to embrace the health benefits of outdoor spaces.

Pikes Peak Heritage Series and Colorado Springs Health Foundation sought to continue the momentum established by this report while focusing on their local community. The two organizations jointly sponsored a speaker series to explore the century-old relationship between the outdoors and health in the Pikes Peak region. The first session focused on public health and the significance of the Outdoor Rx Report to the Pikes Peak region. The second (canceled due to inclement weather) was structured to discuss the healthcare industry and explore how the Pikes Peak region’s outdoor resources could be utilized in healthcare. The final session directed attention to the area’s history as a healthy region and highlighted the organizations currently working to improve the health of the region’s residents by increasing access to outdoor resources and recreation.
SESSION ONE:
ROLE OF THE OUTDOORS IN SHAPING A HEALTHIER
COLORADO SPRINGS

SUMMARY

The keynote speaker discussed the scientific basis for the claim that time spent outdoors impacts health and the panelists elaborated on what these findings mean for employers, their communities and the environment.

SPEAKERS

Keynote
Dr. Lee Newman, MD, MA, FACOEM, FCPP; Professor and Director,
Center for Healthy Work and Environment, UC Denver

Moderator
Samantha Alert; Deputy Director, Colorado Outdoor Recreation Industry Office

Panelists
Gabriel Guillaume; President and CEO, LiveWell Colorado
Jim Petterson; Southwest and Colorado Director, Trust for Public Land

KEYNOTE

Dr. Lee Newman

When people experience nature, their perceived well-being improves as their blood pressure and cortisol levels go down. Keynote speaker Dr. Lee Newman expounded upon these benefits and the other positive effects that the outdoors have on one’s health. For instance, several studies have recorded increases in mood and decreases in stress and fatigue after time spent outside. Beyond those improvements, a walk in the woods promotes physical activity and heightened social contact, which come with their own health benefits. As one of the contributors to the Colorado Outdoor Rx Report, Dr. Newman connected these advantageous effects to strategies that promote collaboration between public, private and nonprofit sectors to get people outside.

Image courtesy of Dr. Lee Newman
Though the benefits of outdoor exposure are well accounted for, many individuals still face barriers to accessing and utilizing the natural assets in their communities. For those of a lower economic status or in a rural area, time spent enjoying green spaces is shown to be minimal. Proximity to the outdoors does not necessarily translate to engagement. For this reason, Dr. Newman explained that connecting people with nature will require more work than advertising the promising results of scientific studies. Instead, changes in behavior will need to come from individual and organizational strategies that help residents gain access to the resources they need to recreate outside.

Dr. Newman collaborates with organizations and encourages them to focus on the well-being of their employees and opportunities available in their natural landscape. There are significant potential benefits for businesses if, for example, they adopt an outdoor component in their wellness programs given the physical and emotional advantages to outdoor exposure. Another industry strategy outlined by Dr. Newman is the use of prescriptions from medical providers that recommend outdoor time. These outdoor prescriptions can promote exposure among those who do not yet understand the value of outdoor recreation. This is a step in the right direction and just the beginning of engaging industries and improving population health by changing the way the Colorado communities interact with the outdoors.
Gabriel Guillaume and Jim Petterson joined Dr. Newman for a panel discussion moderated by Samantha Albert.

The panel continued the conversation on community access to the outdoors. Guillaume emphasized that access goes beyond proximity to cultural connection. If individuals are not seeing people like themselves in parks or other outdoor spaces, they are less likely to engage in such environments. For this reason, those encouraging exposure to nature must consider the unique relationship between an individual and outdoor recreation. This type of relationship played a part during a project in southeast Colorado Springs described by Petterson. In order to renovate Panorama Park, Trust for Public Land made outreach a priority and collected 1,400 surveys from community members on what they wanted to see in this space. Such an example reveals that tangible results come from simply asking people what they need in an outdoor space and letting them come together around that initiative.

Petterson added that the quality of a park or trail is as important as proximity and design in stopping what he sees as a detrimental migration indoors. Even though 74 percent of Colorado Springs residents live within walking distance of a park, these parks are not always welcoming or useable. Dr. Newman pointed out that people do not need the location of parks identified for them, and officials should instead address the financial and workplace issues that prevent access. In the workplace, many opportunities exist to help employers understand why they should want to have healthier employees. Dr. Newman explained that Colorado employers are expressing a desire for productive employees who come to work with a positive attitude, and this conversation on outdoor exposure is part of that equation. Employers could also benefit from the lower health care costs that come with healthier communities.

Though all panelists advocated for increased time spent outside, they also acknowledged the environmental impacts that accompany overuse of recreational areas. Petterson outlined a few strategies to address population growth and use of our natural assets, like utilizing latest design methodologies when creating and updating these outdoor spaces. Additionally, residents should be encouraged to use a variety of spaces rather than congregating on a single trail or landmark. The health benefits are identical whether one walks in their backyard or hikes in a national park. Dr. Newman emphasized that people do not need to travel great distances to recreate, as this would turn their activity into another fossil fuel sport. Guillaume proposed that they should be talking to people about the wide array of activities they can do outside in order to dispel the notion that there are only a few specific and elite recreational activities available in the outdoors.

Given environmental concerns and barriers to access, getting folks outside to take advantage of the health benefits that nature can offer is a complex issue that includes a variety of factors. All of the panelists at this event have embraced this challenge, and the resources that highlight a few of their efforts are in the references section. The issues and innovative ideas brought up in this first session set the stage for the next Heritage Series discussion on what the healthcare industry can do to change behavior and increase access to the outdoors.
SESSION TWO:
THE STATE OF HEALTH AND WELLNESS IN THE PIKES PEAK REGION

SUMMARY

After an engaging and informative first session exploring the Outdoor RX Report and highlighting the health and wellness benefits of nature and outdoor recreation, the next event focused on the role of the healthcare industry in integrating the outdoors into acute care. Though the event was cancelled due to weather, Michele Lueck, President and CEO of Colorado Health Institute, and Cari Davis, Executive Director of Colorado Springs Health Foundation, provided some of the context they planned to share in the section below.

• Nature is good for you!

Increases...

- Physical activity
- Health benefits
- Social connections
- Longevity

Decreases...

- Anxiety and depression

Image courtesy of Michele Lueck

THOUGHTS FROM CARI DAVIS
Executive Director, Colorado Springs Health Foundation

Historically, hospitals and other healthcare delivery organizations have invested little in the healing power of outdoor recreation. While they may understand how outdoor recreation can be helpful, they are paid to care for sick people, and outdoor recreation is not a billable expense. Hospital reimbursement rates are driven at the national level, by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), and when CMS begins to pay for outdoor recreation, there will be changes in the healthcare industry’s willingness to invest in and promote the great outdoors as often as it advises surgery or prescribes medication.
Some clinics and/or individual care providers have begun to “prescribe” greater physical activity, good nutrition and/or time outside. As featured on the PBS Newshour, a clinic at the University of California San Francisco Benioff Children’s Hospital in Oakland, California has been writing prescriptions for time outside (PBS Newshour: Why Doctors are Increasingly Prescribing Nature). This effort is part of the broader Park Prescription initiative, ParkRx, which engages park agencies, healthcare providers and community organizations to improve mental and physical health through nature. ParkRx programs are now appearing all over the country, including six in Colorado.

In summary, there are promising, outdoor-focused practices in health care, but they are not currently part of accepted medical practice. To bring them to scale – make them a recognized, understood and expected part of our healthcare toolkit for both healthcare providers and patients/families – will require healthcare payors to recognize and pay the healthcare industry to leverage the healing power of the outdoors.

### Health Factors that contribute to overall length and quality of life:

- **Health Behaviors**
  - Tobacco Use
  - Diet & Exercise
  - Alcohol & Drug Use
  - Sexual Activity

- **Clinical Care**
  - Access to Care
  - Quality of Care

- **Social and Economic Factors**
  - Education
  - Employment
  - Income
  - Community Safety
  - Family & Social Support

- **Physical Environment**
  - Air & Water Quality
  - Housing & Transit

*Image courtesy of Michele Lueck*
SESSION THREE:
PIKES PEAK REGIONAL HEALTH: RICH PAST & ROBUST PRESENT
SHAPED BY THE OUTDOORS

SUMMARY

The keynote speakers and panel explored how increased access to the outdoors improves peoples’ health and how Colorado Springs can take advantage of its natural assets to bring the outdoors into healthcare.

SPEAKERS

Keynotes
Dr. Ned Calonge; President & CEO, The Colorado Trust
Leah Davis Witherow; Curator of History, Colorado Springs Pioneers Museum

Moderator
Mina Liebert; Director of Community Impact, Pikes Peak Community Foundation

Panelists
Aubrey Day; Healthy Environment Planner, El Paso County Public Health
Karen Palus; Director, City of Colorado Springs Parks, Recreation and Cultural Services
Nancy Perez; Marketing & Outreach Coordinator, Generation Wild of the Pikes Peak Region at Catamount Institute

KEYNOTES

Leah Davis Witherow

To address the rich past of our region’s culture of healthy living, Leah Davis Witherow, Curator of the Colorado Springs Pioneers Museum, began the third session by discussing the individuals with lung conditions who moved to Colorado Springs in the 1880s believing the dry air would aid their recovery. The entrance and occasional recovery of these patients gave the Pikes Peak region the reputation as a place for healing.

According to Witherow, General William J. Palmer used that reputation as he expanded his businesses across the region in the 1860s and 1870s, and his marketing seemed to work. Tens of thousands of people came to the Colorado Springs area in the early 1900s, with as many as one in three immigrants traveling for their own health or the health of a loved one. There were 15 sanitoriums in the town. As Witherow mentioned, “we [Colorado Springs] were in the business of health, and we did it well.”
However, Colorado Springs was also in the business of the outdoors. General Palmer himself donated more than 2,000 acres for a park system designed to be world-class and easily accessible. Palmer extolled the natural assets of the region, highlighting the proximity of Pikes Peak, the springs in Manitou and the pure air as contributors to the healthy nature of the region. The region’s reputation as a beautiful and healthy place persists to this day, and it is likely that the natural beauty and personal health of the region are related.

Dr. Ned Calonge

Dr. Ned Calonge, President and CEO of The Colorado Trust, delivered the second keynote address for this session. He further explored this connection between health and the outdoors, focusing specifically on the importance of enacting health equity — attaining the highest level of health for all people. In doing so, Dr. Calonge noted that equity in health requires a societal commitment to addressing existing inequities like health disparities based on race, class, gender, age, place of residence and many other social parameters.

Dr. Calonge attests that these disparities are most definitely at play in the health of Coloradans. According to Dr. Calonge, statistics compiled by the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment suggest that Black and Latinx youth have notably higher probabilities of experiencing multiple serious health conditions compared to their Anglo counterparts in Colorado (see images on the next page). Dr. Calonge credits these disparities to social determinants of health—indicators of health that depend upon the circumstances in which people are born or live. He encouraged those in attendance to think of social determinants of health as opportunities and barriers to accessing healthcare and a healthy lifestyle, which can include the color of one’s skin and where one lives.
Fortunately, according to research conducted by The Colorado Trust, parks can improve health by encouraging physical activity. Access to green spaces positively affects health, relieving stress, improving mental health and focus, and reducing anxiety and depression. Unfortunately, according to Dr. Calonge, by merely noting those parks are free and open to anyone, the city does not guarantee that the health benefits of parks are accessible by all demographics. Access to and comfort with city parks is unevenly distributed across the Pikes Peak region, so more work is needed to make sure all of the region can access these health benefits equitably.

Images courtesy of Dr. Ned Calonge
Dr. Calonge's presentation was followed by panel featuring Aubrey Day, Karen Palus and Nancy Perez and moderated by Mina Liebert.

These individuals addressed the disparities in access to or comfort within green spaces and public parks. The panelists discussed the financial and cultural barriers many residents in the Pikes Peak region face in accessing parks and greenspaces, and thus, the health benefits that accompany those spaces. Often, a park is not within walking distance of a neighborhood. If that neighborhood has limited socioeconomic means, transport by car to a park may not be an option. Additionally, parks are not often culturally relevant. For instance, larger family groups are less likely to use a park with small, immobile picnic tables.

Panelists went on to discuss ways their various organizations are working to reduce that problem by intentionally increasing access to parks and greenspaces in the Pikes Peak region. Organizations like Catamount Institute and Generation Wild exist to reduce financial barriers to accessing the outdoors and to spark a passion for time spent outdoors. The programs work with schools to create structured opportunities for time spent outside, hoping to spark habits that will lead to students pursuing their own, unstructured time spent outside. Meanwhile, Colorado Springs Department of City Parks, Recreation and Cultural Services is bringing the outdoors to more residents through work in its parks and community centers, especially those serving communities most affected by health disparities in Colorado Springs. El Paso County Public Health funds programs to improve community relations in public greenspaces, and their efforts reduce crime in public parks and improve use of those spaces. Often, the efforts of these panelists have led them to work together, collaborating to magnify the effect of their work. Through individual programs and collaborative efforts, these organizations foster community buy-in for local parks and greenspaces within each community.

The problems faced by the Pikes Peak region concerning health and access to the outdoors are manifold and complex. However, the groundwork for a healthy region was set during the founding of Colorado Springs, and capable players and partnerships are presently taking action to ensure equitable access to the outdoors and the health benefits they can provide. The third session of this Pikes Peak Heritage Series ended on a hopeful note — panelists and audience members set their attention on a future where access to the outdoors and their public health benefits is not a disparate privilege.
TAKEAWAYS

Each session built upon the idea that exposure to the outdoors enhances the health of those in the Pikes Peak region. With its rich history as a beacon of healing and outdoor recreation, Colorado Springs may be the ideal location to marry public health and the outdoors. Unfortunately, many in the community face barriers to accessing safe and inclusive natural environments. Our keynote speakers and panelists emphasized the disparities present in outdoor recreation and proposed solutions to help more individuals reap the physical and mental benefits of a walk in the park.

The health benefits of outdoor exposure are numerous and backed by notable research.

**Spending time in nature can result in:**

- Lower blood pressure and cortisol levels
- Reduction in stress and fatigue
- Increase in social contact
- Increase in physical activity

Panelists agreed that everyone in the region should have the opportunity to access these health benefits in a manner that fits their lifestyle and considers their financial and social constraints.

**Community members may face a number of barriers to outdoor recreation including:**

- No proximity to an outdoor space and no means of transport to reach these spaces
- A work schedule that prevents a relaxing foray into nature
- Fear of visiting a nearby greenspace due to criminal activities or disrepair
- Lack of cultural connection to or community ownership of a park

While trying to increase access to parks and greenspaces, the community also needs to consider the environmental impact of increased land use. Panelists suggested that residents should be encouraged to recreate in a wide variety of spaces rather than congregating in one popular spot. Additionally, children should learn to care for the land at a young age, and residents and visitors alike should keep it top of mind when accessing the outdoors.

Though the environmental and social factors outlined above may seem daunting, Heritage Series panelists and keynote speakers did not shy away from offering solutions to better connect communities with the outdoors.

**A few key ideas include:**

- Soliciting community input on the design of a park to foster a sense of ownership
- Encouraging those in the healthcare industry to promote and prescribe time spent outdoors
- Educating business professionals on the importance of outdoor exposure to employee health and productivity
- Facilitating collaboration between entities in the public and private sectors to address challenges associated outdoor access

While there is agreement on the health benefits of the outdoors, more work is required across all economic sectors to ensure that a couple hours enjoying nature is a possible luxury for everyone.
THE PUBLIC SECTOR
• Continue to develop new parks and open spaces
• Support improvements to existing green spaces

THE PRIVATE SECTOR
• Encourage health care providers to adopt practices outlined in this report and the Colorado Outdoor Rx report
• Continue to fund research and evaluation of the health benefits of nature-based recreation

THE NONPROFIT SECTOR
• Provide environmental and outdoor education opportunities such as experiential learning in nature and outdoor skills courses

ALL SECTORS
• Incorporate nature and outdoor recreation into workplace wellness benefits
• Develop programs and interventions that promote health through outdoor activities including programs that increase access to outdoor recreation

To combat these barriers to entry, the following actions are recommended:
REFERENCES


To enhance, encourage and promote the current and future well-being of the people of Colorado.