



THE DENVER FOUNDATION

# Report to the Community

## 2011 Listening Campaign Findings

# Letter from The Denver Foundation

## Listening

Dear Community Partners:

For eighty-six years, The Denver Foundation has served as Metro Denver's community foundation, working with local philanthropists to make our community stronger.

When we were originally created, the concept was to entrust charitable assets left by generous donors to a group of leaders who would keep their fingers on the pulse of the community, identifying needs and determining where best to use the resources commended to their care.

Our Board of Trustees continues to play this critical role today, now in partnership with hundreds of living donors who have created charitable funds at The Denver Foundation. In recent years, the Foundation has conducted Listening Campaigns to understand community issues and assets. These campaigns have informed the priorities of our Community Grants Program and, this year, will inform the creation of our organization-wide strategic plan. As we write, the strategic plan is in development. We look forward to sharing it with the community when it is complete.

Now we are pleased to share the results of the 2011 Listening Campaign. Since we conducted our last campaign in 2007, our country has experienced its worst economic downturn in 70 years. Metro Denver has suffered from the effects of the Great Recession, and we sought to understand what the community sees as its most urgent concerns.

You will read in these findings that the **residents of our region—from the playground to the boardroom—share a deep regard for Metro Denver and its assets, as well as concerns about its future.** They envision a future where our community can provide a great education for all of its children, where people are gainfully employed and businesses thrive, and where no one has difficulty meeting their basic needs for food, health care, and shelter.

As you read these findings, we hope you will consider sharing your reflections with us through email to [listening@denverfoundation.org](mailto:listening@denverfoundation.org) or online at [www.denverfoundation.org/listening](http://www.denverfoundation.org/listening). Listening to you is an integral part of The Denver Foundation's DNA, a practice that guides our steps as we do our best to live up to the trust given to us by past generations and by our current donors. Together, we can create the future Metro Denver we all envision.



*Kenzo Kawanabe*  
Chair, Board of Trustees



*David Miller*  
President and CEO



*Pamela Kenney Basey*  
Chair, Strategic Planning Task Force  
Board of Trustees

# The 2011 Listening Campaign

To further its connection to the community and to drive its new strategic plan, The Denver Foundation recently engaged in a four-month Listening Campaign throughout the Denver metropolitan area. **The purposes of the Listening Campaign were to better understand what a broad segment of Denver-area residents think contributes most to a high quality of life, and to gather insight into how we can best meet the region's most pressing and important needs.** The Listening Campaign examined the strengths and challenges of the Denver community, and asked how the community should address current and future challenges, including the role that local philanthropic organizations should play.

The topics that the 2011 Listening Campaign addressed were similar to those the Foundation addressed in

past efforts, but the reach and scope were much broader. As part of the 2011 Listening Campaign, the study team used interviews, focus groups, public forums, and surveys to engage nearly 800 community leaders and stakeholders — including business and civic leaders, community residents, current and former Foundation volunteers, nonprofit professionals, Denver Foundation fund holders, and the general public (for details, see the “Methodology” section at the end of this report).

At every stage of the Listening Campaign, the study team asked participants to set aside their personal and organizational interests and think about the entire Denver metropolitan community. **Consensus emerged on a number of issues and community priorities.**

This report describes key findings from the 2011 Listening Campaign as they relate to the core issue areas that participants identified, including specific comments and insights that the study team gathered during interviews, focus/listening groups, and public forums. Participants shared factors that they believe are important to a high quality of life. **They also identified strengths and challenges of the Metro Denver community in areas such as education, economic opportunity, and basic human needs.**

The Denver Foundation thanks the team at BBC Research & Consulting for their excellent work in conducting the 2011 Listening Campaign.

*NOTE: The quotes that appear throughout this report represent the many perspectives shared by nearly 800 respondents and don't necessarily reflect the views of The Denver Foundation.*

**The mission of The Denver Foundation is to inspire people and mobilize resources to strengthen our community.**

**The Denver Foundation envisions a community where all residents in Metro Denver have the opportunity for a high quality of life.**

# Quality of Life & Visions of Denver

A theme that often came up during the Listening Campaign was access — community members believe that the opportunity for a high quality of life depends on residents having equitable access to what Denver has to offer.

The incredibly diverse array of Listening Campaign participants share a vision of a Denver community that provides opportunities for a high quality of life for all Denver residents.



Educational system that produces high achievement regardless of income, race, gender, or ability.

Housing development that is sensitive to new and existing residents and that promotes diverse communities.



Human services that meet basic needs, so that all Denver residents can experience the community's richness.

Thriving familial networks that support families in need.



*"A high quality of life means that basic needs are met. Everyone has the opportunity for education and has adequate access to health care. People can focus on quality of life rather than focusing on ... getting by on a daily basis."*

# Quality of Life & Visions of Denver

Transportation that is accessible and affordable to all Denver residents.



A collaborative philanthropic community that works to identify and help address gaps left by government shortfalls.



Access to high quality, affordable health care that takes a preventive, holistic approach.



A diverse economy of large and small businesses that provides abundant employment opportunities.



Civic engagement to address difficult community issues supported by strong, effective leaders.



A community that is welcoming to newcomers and immigrants and in which nobody lives in the shadows.

*"[A high quality life means], in one word, access ... Everyone needs access to good education, to clear and free services, and to be able to develop creativity through exposure to the arts."*

# Strengths of Denver

Community members discussed strengths of the Denver metropolitan community that allow opportunities for a high quality of life. Participants identified characteristics that were inherent to Denver itself, but also characteristics related to the city's economy, leaders, and residents. Core strengths that community members discussed included:

- Great weather and geography, including access to the outdoors
- Attractive amenities, including arts and culture and professional sports
- Diverse economy and “entrepreneurial spirit”
- Effective leadership that cares about the community
- High level of civic dialogue and engagement
- Well-educated population
- Community that is tolerant of newcomers

Many Listening Campaign participants acknowledged that many of Denver's strengths only apply to certain segments of the population, based mainly on demographic characteristics and socioeconomic status.

## Community



*“The strengths of Denver come from the community — the strong sense of community of Denver residents. Quality of life is very high for many people. There is a balanced economy, the business community is engaged and involved in the community, the philanthropic community works well together, and the government interaction is unique.”*

# Challenges of Denver

In addition to discussing strengths of the Denver metropolitan community, Listening Campaign participants identified challenges that Metro residents face which pose barriers to opportunities for a high quality of life. An overarching challenge that many participants discussed was that different segments of the population experience different outcomes.

Certain segments of the population are more likely to experience challenges in the Denver community based on various characteristics, including:

- Race and ethnicity
- Citizenship and documentation status
- Socioeconomic status
- Mental and physical disabilities
- Gender
- Sexual orientation
- Geography

A theme that often came up during the Listening Campaign was access — community members believed that the opportunity for a high quality of life depended on residents obtaining equal access to what Denver has to offer.

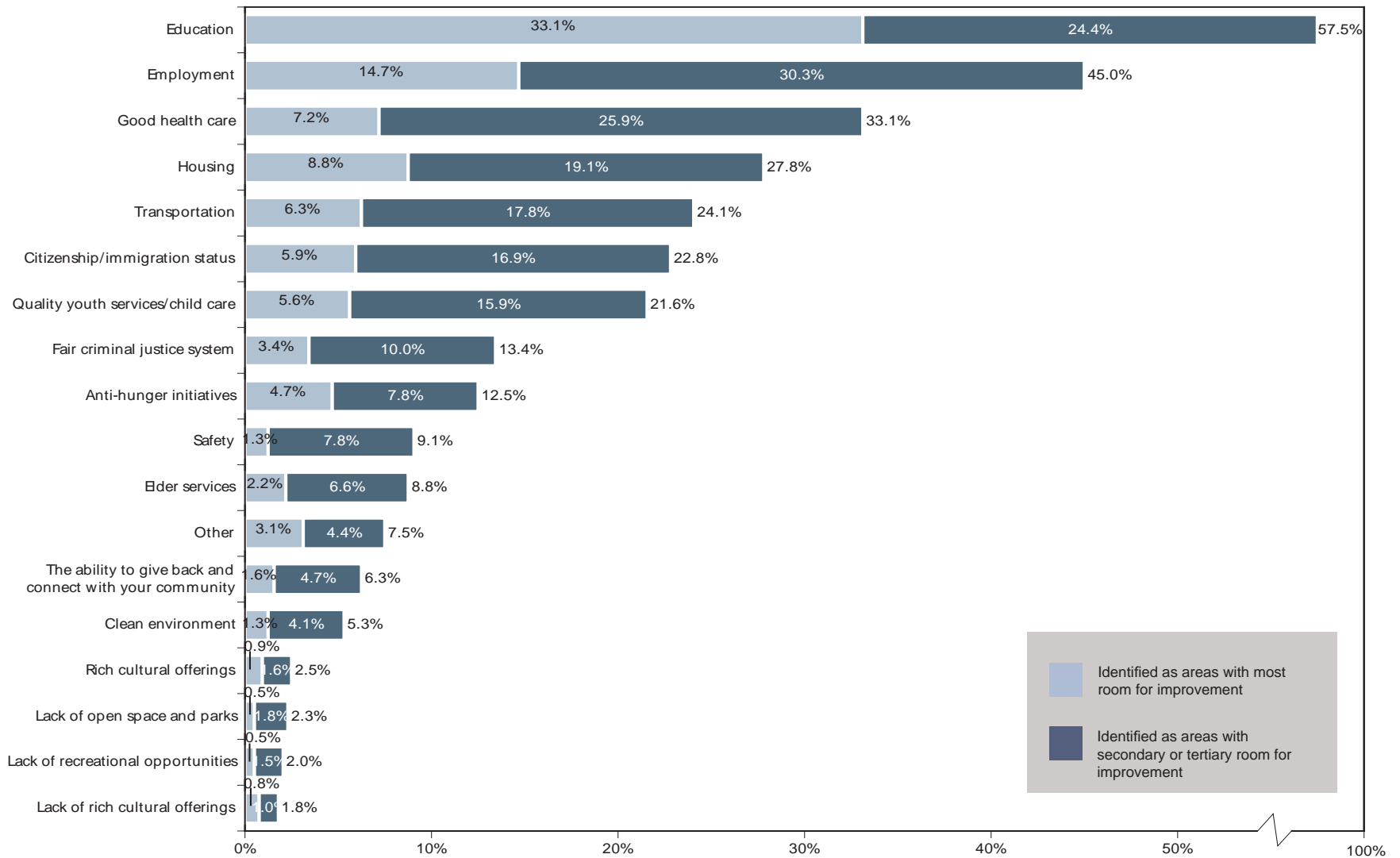
## Barriers to access



*"There is a real misconception about the quality of life in Metro Denver. Just because of the weather, the beauty, and the attraction of this area, we believe everyone is leading a great life. It's a paradox — we get tricked into thinking that people of Metro Denver are all doing pretty well."*

# Key Areas Identified

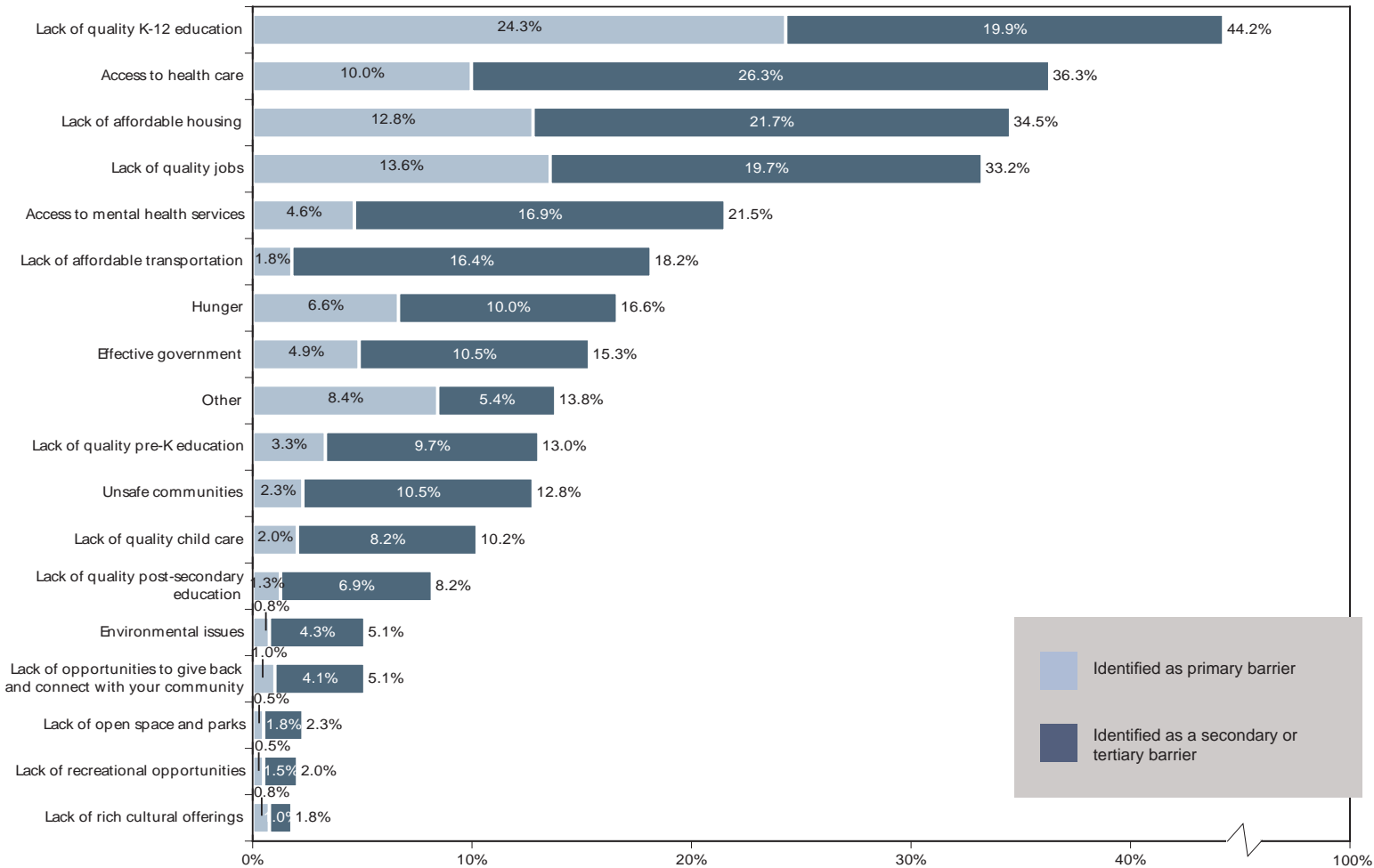
## Areas needing improvement in Metro Denver



Source: BBC Research & Consulting.

# Improvement

## Key Areas Identified as Barriers to a High Quality of Life in Metro Denver



Source: BBC Research & Consulting.

When asked about the components that contribute to a high quality of life, community members responded with a wide range of answers. The three strongest areas of focus were education, economic development, and a group of concerns that fall into the category of basic human needs. But these and several other components are intertwined. As respondents described their concerns, it became clear that when we address one of these challenges, the others come with it. For example, education is often described as a pathway out of poverty, but without a job at the other end, meeting basic needs will still be a problem.

The next section outlines a wide range of areas of concern and shares the voices of the community regarding specific challenges.

# Barriers

Community members most commonly identified education as an important contributor to a high quality of life. They related education to other outcomes, such as income, economic growth, and community development. Most of all, community members indicated that Denver's educational system needs to improve.

Almost one-half (44 percent) of survey respondents identified Denver's K-through-12 educational system as a key barrier to Denver residents having the opportunity for a high quality of life. About 60 percent of survey respondents indicated that education is one of the areas in which there is the most room for improvement in the Denver community. Participants identified several challenges related to education in the Denver metropolitan area, including:

- Disparities in access to high-quality education, for people of different incomes, races/ethnicities, and those with disabilities
- Relatively high drop-out rate, particularly for low-income communities, racial/ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities
- Students who are passed through the educational system despite lack of basic knowledge and skills
- Educated workforce that is imported rather than homegrown
- Lack of public awareness and involvement in improving Denver Metro public schools
- Inability to retain good teachers and remove ineffective teachers
- Low funding for Denver's educational system, including elementary, secondary, and higher education
- Lack of emphasis on early childhood education programs and afterschool programs

Many Listening Campaign participants acknowledged that several of Denver's strengths only apply to certain segments of the population, with differentials based on demographic characteristics and socioeconomic status.



**Vision: Locally-educated residents who can compete in the global economy.**

# Voices on Education

*"I look at the black community in particular. ... It seems to me that the lowest performing students are black male students. ... Young black males also [have] the highest incarceration rate, and it's hard not to focus on the role model piece of that equation."*



*"There has to be a way that non-partisan participants can talk about the way our education is failing. ... Everyone has a stake in that, whether rich or poor. Education is the great equalizer. One thing we know — if you have a good education, no matter your background, you can change your life."*

*"I think we have a disparity in schools across the metropolitan area, and I think it's across the state as well. I think if you just draw geographic boundaries around income, it begins to show us where the opportunities are perhaps not equal."*



*"The K-through-12 system makes me crazy. A talented, good teacher is a gift, but it is hard to reward and retain good teachers in the current system. It is also difficult to remove ineffective teachers."*

*"Funding priorities should be in education ... Tie tax dollars for the K-through-12 system where success is being exhibited, and tie funding to those organizations that are doing the best work. Reward the behavior you want."*

# Economic Opportunity

Community members often identified **economic opportunity** and employment as important factors in providing access to a high quality of life. Many participants discussed the intersection between economic opportunity and other factors, particularly education and health.

Many community members indicated that the job market in Denver needs to improve. One-third of survey respondents identified the job market as a key barrier to Denver residents having the opportunity for a high quality of life. Almost one-half (45 percent) of survey respondents indicated that the job market is one of the areas in which there is the most room for improvement in Denver.

Participants identified several challenges related to economic opportunity and employment in Denver, including:

- Relatively high unemployment that affects other aspects of life
- Disparities in economic opportunity based on socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity
- Growing financial gaps between rich and poor
- Inability to attract new industries and large companies to relocate in Denver
- Workforce that is educated, but that is largely imported rather than homegrown

However, some Listening Campaign participants remarked that the Denver job market is not as bad as in other parts of the country and that the city has an “entrepreneurial spirit” that serves it well.

# Opportunity

# Jobs

**Vision: High quality employment for all residents provided by a healthy mix of large and small businesses.**

# Voices on Economic Opportunity



*"I would go back to education — everything starts there. ... A disproportionate number of black people [are] underemployed and unemployed. The largest underemployed [groups] are our minority bases. ... The economic situation will be driven by education."*

*"There has been an increase in the economic downturn and in unemployed people. ... Those workers that are in the lower skilled jobs are finding themselves out of work because those with higher skills are taking anything they can get, so it has a huge impact on our lower income individuals and families when the economy turns for the worse. ... Unemployment [benefits] are not always enough."*

*"One of the beauties of Denver is, while it's not dominated by any particular market sector, this isn't Silicon Valley or Texas with gas and oil, and we don't have asset markets. ... Sometimes that is troublesome in branding your city's identity. It protects our economy because of the diversity but makes it difficult to set our brand and attract that business community."*



*"The greatest challenges facing Metro Denver, I think, are jobs and the economy. We need to get people back to work. When the city is under water in certain areas and is having to cut funds, it impacts people. And if we can get the small business engine going again, we can get these people employed and generate revenue for the city and state."*

*"We need increased employment opportunities. Young adults who are educated shouldn't feel compelled to leave the state. We need enough excellent local job opportunities. ... We also need to further diversify the economic base of the Metro Area. [We need] more manufacturing jobs."*

# Basic Needs

Many Listening Campaign participants remarked that a large proportion of Denver metropolitan area residents have difficulty **meeting basic needs**, which makes it impossible for them to enjoy a high quality of life. Some of the indicators identified by community members as evidence that basic needs are not being met for many Denver residents include:

- Childhood hunger
- Relatively high rate of homelessness
- Poverty-stricken neighborhoods
- Lack of affordable housing options

Community members also drew connections among those indicators and other factors, such as education, economic opportunity, and mental and physical health.

More than one-third (35 percent) of survey respondents identified affordable housing as a key barrier to Denver residents having the opportunity for a high quality of life, and nearly one-fifth (17 percent) identified hunger as a key barrier. A substantial number of survey respondents indicated that there is the most room for improvement in the areas of housing (19 percent) and fighting hunger (11 percent).

Hunger Poverty Homelessness



**Vision: All residents can look beyond their basic needs to experience the richness of the Metro Denver community.**

# Voices on Basic Needs



*"There are more and more families who need help feeding, housing, and educating their children than ever before. New families keep coming in [for help] who have never had problems in the past. There is more pressure on rental markets as the housing crisis continues, and rents are actually increasing. Quality, safe homes are getting harder to afford."*

*"I think we're definitely falling behind on the hunger front, and with the majority of those food-challenged residents [being] children. We're not getting the job done right now in the Metro area and in the state. ... We just can't have hungry people in our community. We can't have people who are starving right under our noses."*



*"We have our share of poverty ... 26 percent of Denver's population are receiving some sort of public subsidy. So clearly, we have a whole lot of people who have a whole lot of needs, which, given all the budget constraints that we have in the state, creates real issues."*

*"If we want to address the most important [factors] with respect to a hierarchy of need, then we must get people out of survival mode. ... They have to get out of the hole first before they can do something else, before they can even think about doing something else. For many in Colorado and the Denver area, that hole is hunger and they can't get past that."*

Many community members mentioned **health** as an important component of a high quality of life. Listening Campaign participants discussed many challenges associated with health and health care in the Denver metropolitan area, including:

- Reactionary as opposed to preventive health care
- Unaffordable health care
- Lack of affordable, nutritious food options
- Disparities in health outcomes based on race/ethnicity, income, and ability

More than one-third (36 percent) of survey respondents identified access to health care as a key barrier to Denver residents having the opportunity for a high quality of life. More than one-fifth (22 percent) of survey respondents identified mental health issues as a key barrier. One-third of survey respondents indicated that mental health is one of the areas in which there is the most room for improvement in Denver.

In contrast, some Listening Campaign participants remarked that the Denver metropolitan area has a great health care system and hospitals.

*“Health care is ... a huge issue. Everybody needs a chance for a healthy life. Fresh, healthy food is necessary to keep health. It is hard to get into a pattern of making fresh, healthy food if you’re working seven days a week. People need support for making good health decisions. ... It’s hard to make good food and focus on a healthy lifestyle when you are working multiple jobs or long hours to make ends meet.”*



*“I think there is a growing disparity between upper and lower incomes in terms of obesity. It has to do with what [people with lower incomes] can afford to buy and the long hours that they have to work, meaning that they don’t have time to cook.”*

# Civic Engagement & Leadership

Many Listening Campaign participants listed a strong sense of community and good leaders among Denver's strengths. However, many community members indicated that **civic engagement and leadership** still need to improve to address the community's challenges. For example, about 15 percent of survey respondents identified ineffective government as a key barrier to Denver residents having the opportunity for a high quality of life. The needs that community members identified, related to civic engagement and leadership, include:

- Increased dialogue among citizens
- Understanding issues of other neighborhoods
- Collaboration across the public and private sectors
- Courageous leaders who can make tough decisions



*"All major stakeholders should be involved in leadership on the issues — from grassroots [organizations] to politicians to human services to advocacy [groups] to organizers and workers. And the business community has to see that it is in their self-interest to build Denver and Colorado up from its decline."*

*"Our community tends to take poor people and people living with disadvantages ... disenfranchised people, and we want to kick them to the curb and say, 'That is their problem.' But, if we create a sense of whole and shared community, we tend to feel responsible for all — even the dysfunctional among us — and we will do what is necessary to bring them along."*

*"We have a strong and engaged business community. This is a place where you can participate in civic life easily, even as a newcomer. We have terrific leaders in all sectors."*

# Transportation & Infrastructure

Listening Campaign participants indicated that it is difficult for many people to access the strengths of the Denver metropolitan community because of challenges associated with Metro Denver's transportation and infrastructure. Several people said that Metro Denver public transportation is expensive, and that it prevents some residents from having access to a high quality of life. Participants indicated that transportation challenges affect outcomes such as education, job opportunities, and health.

Almost one-fifth (18 percent) of survey respondents identified affordable transportation as a key barrier to Denver residents having the opportunity for a high quality of life. Nearly one-quarter (24 percent) of survey respondents indicated that transportation is one of the areas in which there is the most room for improvement in Denver.

Some community members expressed optimism about the transportation and infrastructure development that is taking place in Denver, such as FasTracks.

*"Infrastructure is a big deal. ... I think that when we get the transportation infrastructure addressed, more people will have the opportunity to access this higher quality of life."*

*"[FasTracks] is the largest development project in our region in the next ten years, and it has many possible outcomes. The build-out of the full FasTracks system lays groundwork for [transit-oriented development], which yields community, affordable housing, healthy living, and access to regional jobs."*



*"People make decisions [about] work based on accessibility and transportation. It affects where you live [and] where your kid goes to school."*

# Family Well-being

Community members, particularly local nonprofit leaders, discussed the importance of the core family unit – regardless of family structure – and how many of the Metro Denver community’s problems are due, at least in part, to lack of familial networks and support. Listening Campaign participants drew connections between families who lacked adequate structure and support and various adverse outcomes such as poverty, abuse, and child development. Many respondents attributed the breakdown of the family unit to issues that include:

- Over-incarceration of minority fathers
- Deportation of undocumented parents
- Parents not knowing how to parent their children
- Lack of economic opportunity for heads of households

*“We need to improve the early childhood scene through more high-quality, affordable child care and family support. We need better models for supporting parents to help their family succeed. This could be paid maternity leave for non-professional workers, opportunities for paid time off to take care of families when needed, [and] more affordable high-quality infant and toddler care.”*



Voices

*“A broken family creates dysfunction. ... Not only does it create personal issues, but [it creates] tremendous financial issues. If a family experiences a divorce or a split, we often see spousal and child abuse, both of which make things more difficult for them to make it.”*

# Immigration

Some community members commented that the Denver metropolitan community has to address its immigration issues, particularly as they relate to undocumented immigrants in the Latino community. Nearly one-quarter (23 percent) of survey respondents indicated that immigration is one of the areas in which there is the most room for improvement in Denver.

Several Listening Campaign participants remarked that undocumented families are forced to “live in the shadows” and that such families need a national path to citizenship. Some participants also commented that there is a need for more productive conversation about immigration.

“Fixing our dialogue [around] our issue of immigration [is important]. I think [Denver] is extremely hostile about the discussion of immigration .... [People see] the last name Lopez, [and] the first thing people want to know is, ‘Are they legal?’ The dialogue is not healthy around immigration in this city. ... The Latino population is very large, and they are not fully integrated into society and there is a lot of anger around that issue.”

*“In addition to issues of health, housing, and basic needs, there are other challenging layers facing ... the Hispanic community, including the anti-immigrant feeling. ... Many of [the people we serve] are undocumented, and it is difficult to get out of their situation because they are undocumented.”*

*“There needs to be a comprehensive solution to undocumented families. They’re living in the shadows. They need a path to citizenship. ... There needs to be clear and more open laws on workers, to bring them out of the shadow economy and to keep the workers in the open.”*



*“An obvious subpopulation in Denver is those who are here illegally and that is a huge problem that won’t be solved with a simple law. It makes people live in the shadows.”*

# Gentrification & Segregation

**M**any Listening Campaign participants commented that gentrification and segregated neighborhoods are problems in the Denver metropolitan area, particularly in the context of cost-of-living, race relations, and community values. Some community members suggested that low-income, racial/ethnic minorities are being pushed out of the city and into the suburbs.

A few community members remarked that gentrification may be an opportunity to create greater understanding between different racial/ethnic groups.

*"As [Denver] went through its transformation, a lot of the urban core of the city got populated with communities of color, and now, as the economy is changing, some argue that those [people] are being pushed out and the mainstream [population is] coming back to the city. With that comes this cost-of-living [increase] and quality-of-living [increase] in [what] were historically communities of color."*



*"I tell people when [the issue of] gentrification ... comes up, I need a definition of what they are talking about. If they are talking about the process where whites move in and [people of] color move out, talk to me about why that is. What I say publicly is, 'If you don't want the neighborhood to change, don't sell your grandmother's house.' ... The conversation of gentrification is a scary conversation to have when not everyone is on the same page."*

*"People bring up community integration issues, but they don't want to do anything about it. What I am concerned with is a trend where more rich move into the city and push the poor out of the city to the outskirts. ... I think this is not healthy ..."*

*"The gentrification of traditional neighborhoods, like Five Points, and the people who have lived there for generations, is a huge challenge."*

# Other Issue Areas

In addition to the core issue areas that Listening Campaign participants discussed, some participants discussed other issues related to quality of life in the Denver metropolitan area, such as taxes and funding, arts and culture, public safety and incarceration, and the environment and climate change. Some key ideas that community members shared include:

- Colorado's tax structure needs to be revised to be able to fund opportunities for a high quality of life
- Denver has well-developed arts and cultural opportunities, but they are not available to everybody
- Denver must address gang-related violence and high incarceration rates among minority males
- Environment and climate change are issues that the Denver community cares about

# Role of Philanthropy

Listening Campaign participants shared ideas about the role that philanthropic organizations should play in addressing challenges that the Metro Denver community faces and in providing opportunities for a high quality of life to residents:

- Help to fill gaps in addressing basic needs and human services
- Identify community issues and provide funding to address those issues
- Advocate for community needs and particular population segments
- Act as conveners of different community groups and stakeholders to encourage collaboration
- Take risks to support innovative solutions to community problems

*"Foundations need to have a greater voice in advocacy. ... By focusing on advocacy at the local or regional level, foundations could better address the root causes of critical issues that they address through funding programs. These problems require systems change, and there is not enough advocacy to change the systems."*

*"Young people think there should be a shift in the economy to clean technology. Young people worry about global warming, about the state of the environment and all the social issues that go along with it."*

The Denver Foundation and BBC Research & Consulting worked together to develop a comprehensive research plan for the 2011 Listening Campaign that engaged 793 members of the Denver metropolitan community. The research sample was diverse in as many ways as possible, representing community members that varied by geography, culture, gender, race/ethnicity, age, and socioeconomic status. The groups in the community that were involved with the Listening Campaign included:

- Current and former Foundation trustees
- Current and former Foundation committee members
- Denver Foundation donors and fundholders
- Foundation staff
- Local nonprofit organizations
- Recipients of local nonprofit services
- Legal and financial advisors
- Local business, political, and civic leaders
- Leaders of other local foundations
- Community and neighborhood associations
- Interested members of the public

The study team gathered insights about needs of Denver from each of the groups involved with the Listening Campaign. To do so, BBC used the following data-collection efforts:

- In-depth in-person interviews (102 participants)
- Focus/listening groups (209 participants)
- Public forums (25 participants)
- Surveys (457 participants)

The interviews, focus/listening groups, public forums, and surveys addressed several topics related to community needs looking ten years into the future, including:

- Factors that define a high quality of life
- Denver residents' access to a high quality of life
- Strengths and weaknesses of the Denver community
- How the community should address current and future challenges
- Role of local philanthropic organizations



# 793 community voices

## Next steps . . .

### Next steps . . .

The Board of Trustees of The Denver Foundation is currently using the results of the 2011 Listening Campaign to inform the development of the Foundation's 2011–2021 Strategic Plan. Please visit the Foundation's website at [www.denverfoundation.org](http://www.denverfoundation.org) for more information on the strategic-planning process.

### We're still listening!

The Foundation invites you to share your reflections on this report and the needs of the community through email to [listening@denverfoundation.org](mailto:listening@denverfoundation.org) and online at [www.denverfoundation.org/listening](http://www.denverfoundation.org/listening). You can also share your ideas with us on [Facebook](#), and on [Twitter](#) (@TDFcommunity).



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