

Solutions sought to hunger problem in Mesa County

By WYATT HURT

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Mount Garfield Middle School teacher Rachel Smith is no stranger to Mesa County's widespread hunger problem; she sees it firsthand every day.

Twice a month, she spends hundreds of dollars at Sam's Club, stocking a pantry in her classroom. Called "Gator-aid," the pantry feeds a full spectrum of students, ranging from "hungry teenage boys" who want a snack to those who rely on the food to get them through the day.

"I think there are teachers feeding kids at every school. I'd be willing to bet that every teacher has given away their lunch at least once," Smith said.

She was one of 70 attendees at Friday's Mesa County Leadership Forum on Hunger, which brought together community leaders to brainstorm innovative solutions to end local hunger. Co-sponsored by the Western Colorado Community Foundation and the Colorado Health Foundation, the event was a first step in what the organizations hope will be a permanent solution to the problem.

"There are many fantastic organizations working on solving hunger issues, but in the past, they had no common vision," said Alexis Weightman, senior public policy officer at the Colorado Health Foundation. The forum aimed to reverse that trend.

Jennifer Banyan is CEO of R-Evolution Consulting and one of the authors of the newly released "Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger," a statewide plan with a goal of ending hunger in the next five years. She began the morning with a presentation on the blueprint's findings, surprising many attendees with the sheer scope of the problem.

One in seven Mesa County residents is not sure where they'll get their next meal, meaning that 21,000 people are at risk of developing both physical and mental health conditions. Teenagers who are hungry are five times more likely to die by suicide.

Every year, Colorado incurs \$1.2 billion to \$2.1 billion in health care costs because of hunger.

The leaders present in the room, ranging from City Council members to pastors to business owners, were encouraged to work together and think big about innovative solutions.

There was a palpable buzz in the room, as community leaders listened to presen-

tations from hunger-relief organizations and brainstormed ways they could help reduce hunger. Giant notepads hanging at the front of the room quickly filled with ideas.

The discussion centered around six goals: strengthening hunger relief organizations, addressing out-of-school hunger; increasing fresh produce for hunger relief, expanding recovery of food waste, involving health care providers in the movement, and spreading public awareness.

"Mesa County is the first community in the state to commit to hosting a local summit, which means it will serve as a model for other counties across the state," Banyan said.

The community foundation recently made a five-year commitment to serve as the area's local partner for the Colorado Health Foundation and is launching a \$100,000 fund on June 15 to assist hunger-relief efforts in the region. The foundation will also serve as a centralized hub for hunger-relief efforts.

Tedi Gillespie, outreach coordinator for the community foundation, says she hopes the effort will reduce the stigma surrounding hunger.

"There's a common belief that people are hungry because they're sitting around not doing anything," Gillespie said. "That's not the case. Salaries aren't going up, but prices at supermarkets are. The reality is that something has to give."

To contribute to the fund or learn how you or your organization can help, contact Jody Valente at jvalente@wc-cf.org or 243-3767.

Forum on Hunger identifies six goals to make a difference.
