

Telluride Foundation paints picture of regional issues

By Jessica Kutz, Staff Reporter | Posted: Thursday, January 12, 2017 9:15 am

Fifty-nine percent of children in the West End school district qualify for free or reduced-cost school lunches.

Seven suicides took place in San Miguel County in 2016.

The 2015 graduation rate for Hispanic students in the Telluride School District was 14.2 percent lower than the national average.

These statistics are just a fraction of those released by the Telluride Foundation earlier this month.

Paul Major, president and chief executive officer of the Telluride Foundation, said the data was compiled to help the foundation and other nonprofits better understand regional issues.

“Every business looks at who their customer is, and I think that is an analogy for us: ‘Who are the people in our community?’” Major said. “We need to understand what the state of their lives are, whether it is poverty or immigration status or education levels or any of that. It gets back to the fact that it’s healthy to look at, and do a deep dive on, those you serve.”

Lynn Borup, executive director for the Tri-County Health Network, said the network utilizes data to understand the needs that are unique to each community it serves in San Miguel, Montrose and Ouray counties.

“Data is really important,” she said.

The decision to divide the data based on school districts further whittles down how issues affect certain parts of the county, Major said.

“I think it’s helpful. If you just look at San Miguel County, I think (the statistics) get blurred,” he said. “It gives a much better picture” on how people are doing “if you go by school district.”

Borup added that schools offer particularly good access to important data sets.

“That is helpful,” she said. “Schools have really good data that helps represent what is happening in that particular school district.”

The data, which was drawn from the years 2014-2016, provides information about education, demographics, income, health and occupations.

Major said most of the information affirmed what the foundation had already identified as issues in the county and the region

The foundation plans to present the information to the community soon.

“We are going to be at the intergovernmental meeting in a couple of weeks so we will present some of it there,” Major said. “We will present it to some nonprofits for discussion. How do we react to or think

about the data? And how does it inform our work?”

It has become increasingly important for the health network to create its own data in order to track changes in the communities it serves.

For example, “We are working with clinics in the community and helping them track diseases and outcomes for patients,” Borup said.

Major said a key takeaway for the foundation was that regional issues will require collaboration across organizations.

“(Nonprofits) are doing as much as they can (to address these issues), but the real opportunity is to have them collaborate and figure out, where are those gaps? And how do we fill those gaps jointly versus individually?” he said. “You are going to need coalitions working intentionally.”

The West End

According to the Telluride Foundation, when the Tri-State Power Plant closes in 2022 the West End communities of Nucla, Naturita and Paradox will directly lose 67 percent of their tax base.

The company is the largest employer in Nucla, meaning the 15 percent unemployment rate for the area could increase substantially.

According to another statistic released by the foundation, 19.6 percent of the population that resides in the West End school district lives below poverty level, and more than half of that demographic is comprised of single mothers.

Major said the foundation has always supported efforts in the West End and is paying particular attention to the impending closure of the plant.

“We are very supportive of the current effort, which is to get ahead of the tsunami — the closure of the power plant — in an already highly economically stressed area,” he said. “(The West End) either needs to fundamentally change their economic base or there will be no jobs, no way to support the schools, no way to support the medical center, and the community will be devastated.”

The foundation is working with organizations in the West End to increase tourism in order to help stimulate the economy.