

# Tackling Loneliness with Communities (TLC) & Changing Our Mental and Emotional Trajectory (COMET)

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Community partnerships to assess  
loneliness and support mental health in  
eastern Colorado

Presented by  
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# DISCLOSURES

We have no financial investments and receive no funding from any of the private companies talked about in this presentation.

No off-label medication use will be discussed.

We are not mental health experts or care providers.



# High Plains Research Network (HPRN)

- Housed at the University of Colorado Department of Family Medicine
- 16 counties of eastern rural and frontier Colorado
- 54 primary care practices
- 16 hospitals
- 10 local public health departments
- 160,000 people
- Community Advisory Council (C.A.C.)

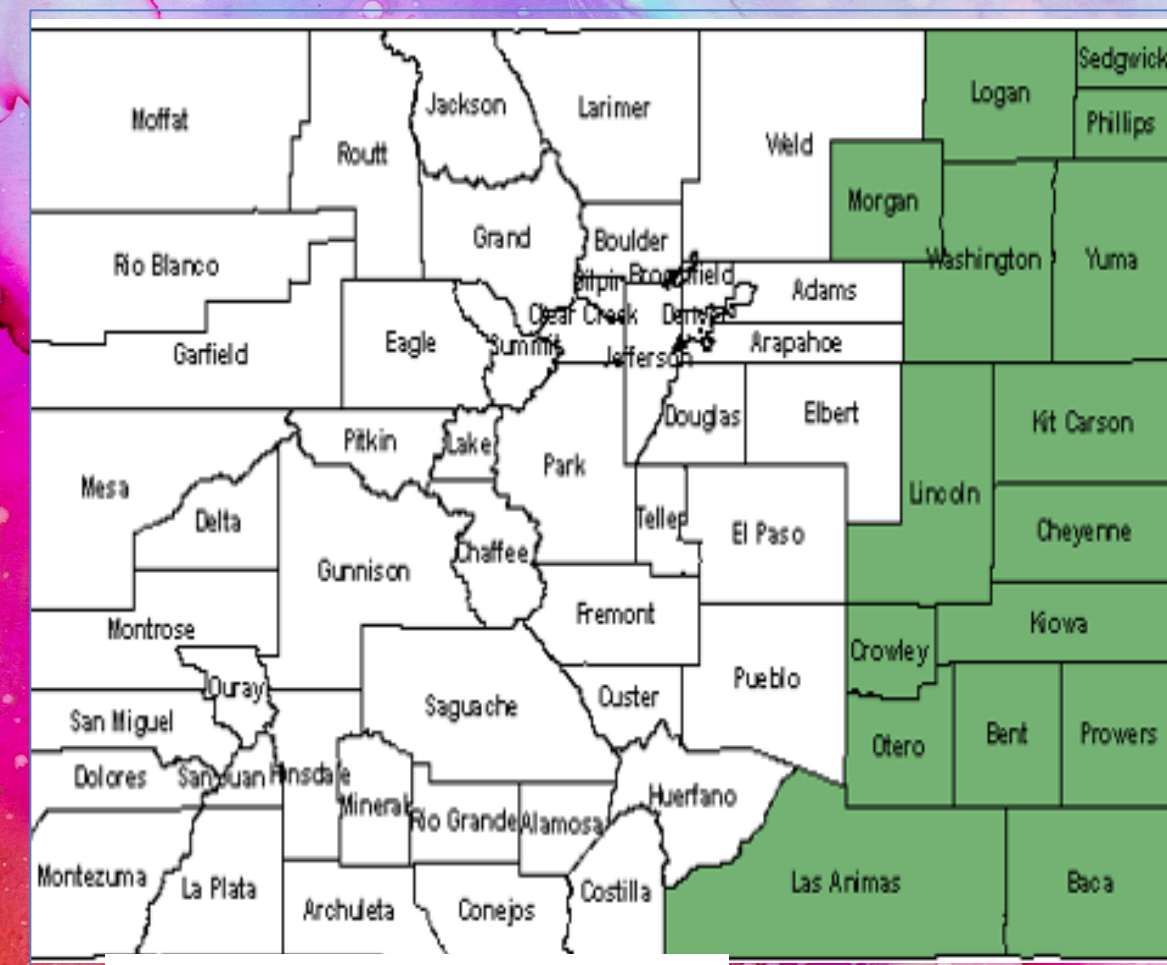


Figure 1. HPRN Region in Colorado



Figure 2. HPRN Community Advisory Council members





**Understanding loneliness &  
addressing mental health  
needs in rural communities**



# Loneliness

- Loneliness is associated with multiple negative medical and mental health outcomes and **increases the risk of mortality by 26%**
- Uptake of loneliness interventions is low, and little is known about effective strategies to address loneliness, particularly in rural communities
- The **Tackling Loneliness with Communities (TLC)** pilot project created a community-academic partnership in the HPRN region to assess loneliness in eastern Colorado and create a local resource for individuals experiencing loneliness in rural communities.





# TLC Project

## **Surveys (n = 214)**

- Using CBPR, community advisory co-created and distributed survey about loneliness in 6 counties
- Cross-sectional surveys using venue-based sampling (convenience sample) of adults in NE CO

## **Interviews (n = 17)**

- Conducted Appreciative Inquiry (AI) interviews with small sample of survey participants
- Asked about experiences with loneliness and coping strategies





# TLC Survey Results

- **More than a third** experienced loneliness
- Women who were younger, non-heterosexual, and had less religious attendance were more likely to be lonely
- Poor mental health and low social support were the strongest predictors of loneliness
- Partnering with local community members led to successful dissemination of surveys



## Conversational Gravity Assist

Be "the other person"

**WELLNESS**

**VULNERABLE SPACE**

**CRISIS**

Someone headed  
toward crisis.

You are here.  
Be "the other person."

Mental Health First Aid,  
Crisis Hotlines,  
Law Enforcement

Community-based **safe venues** for emotional expression

- **COMET** is a community-based **intervention** to activate community members and provide them with **language, tools, and confidence** to intervene when they notice someone around them is unwell – and **before a crisis occurs**.



# COMET Community Training

- Designed to be accessible and used by a wide range of community members
- Conducted in a variety of settings, in-person and virtually (flexible)
- 90 minutes – 2 hours (max)
- Small or large groups
- Includes didactic portion and role-playing with scenarios tailored to local community/group
- Teaches a series of questions to engage a person recognized as not doing well







# Community Trainings (CT)

- 90+ Community Trainings
- 1,300+ Attendees
- Colorado, Wisconsin, Wyoming, California, Montana, Minnesota
- Held at Sale barn, Elks Club, Sheriff's Office, school districts, community colleges, ag departments, volunteer fire departments, primary care practices, veteran's groups...
- Partnerships with local mental health organizations and Extension Agents



# COMET CT Results

Table 1. Likelihood of telling someone you've noticed a change in mood/behavior (n=308)

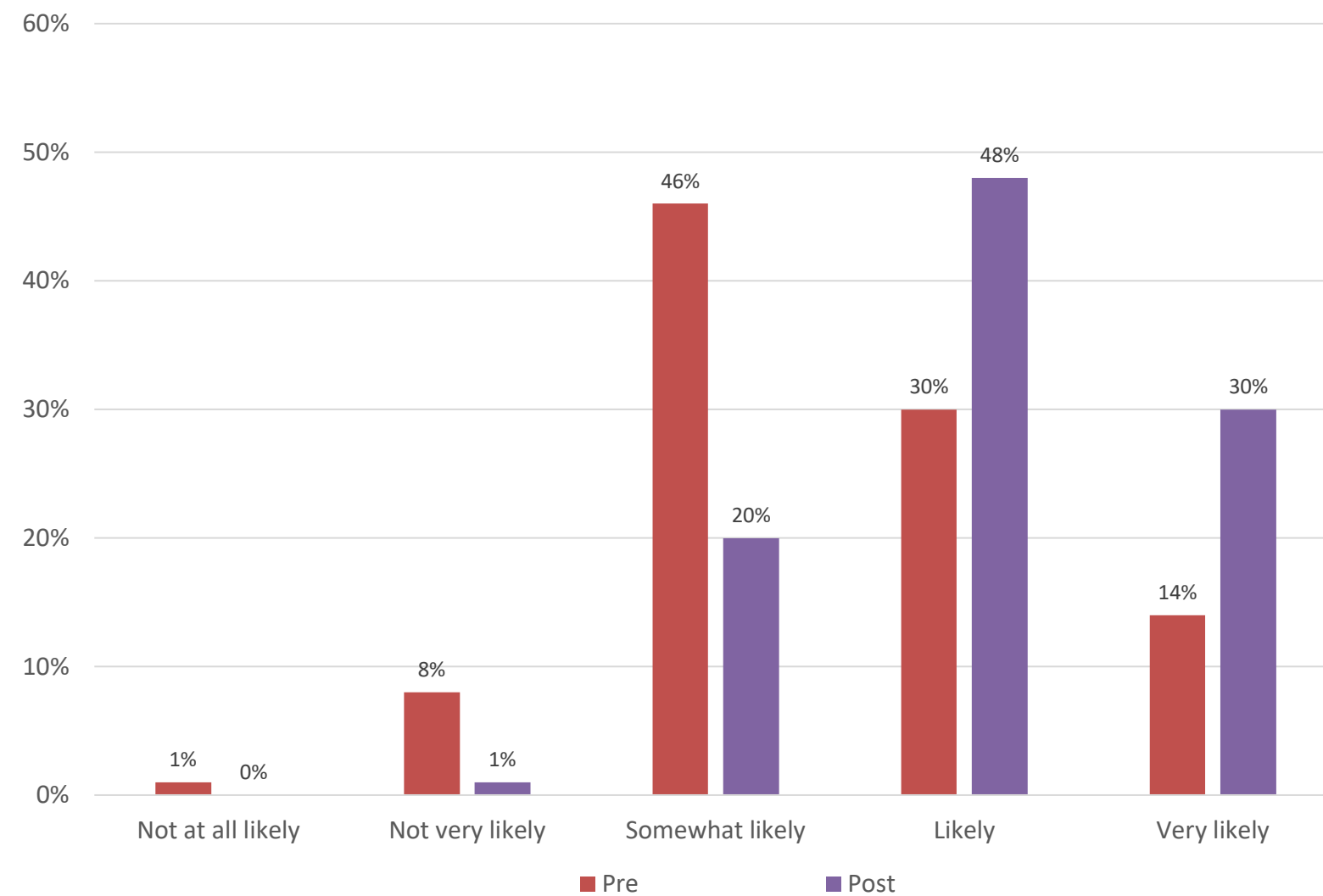
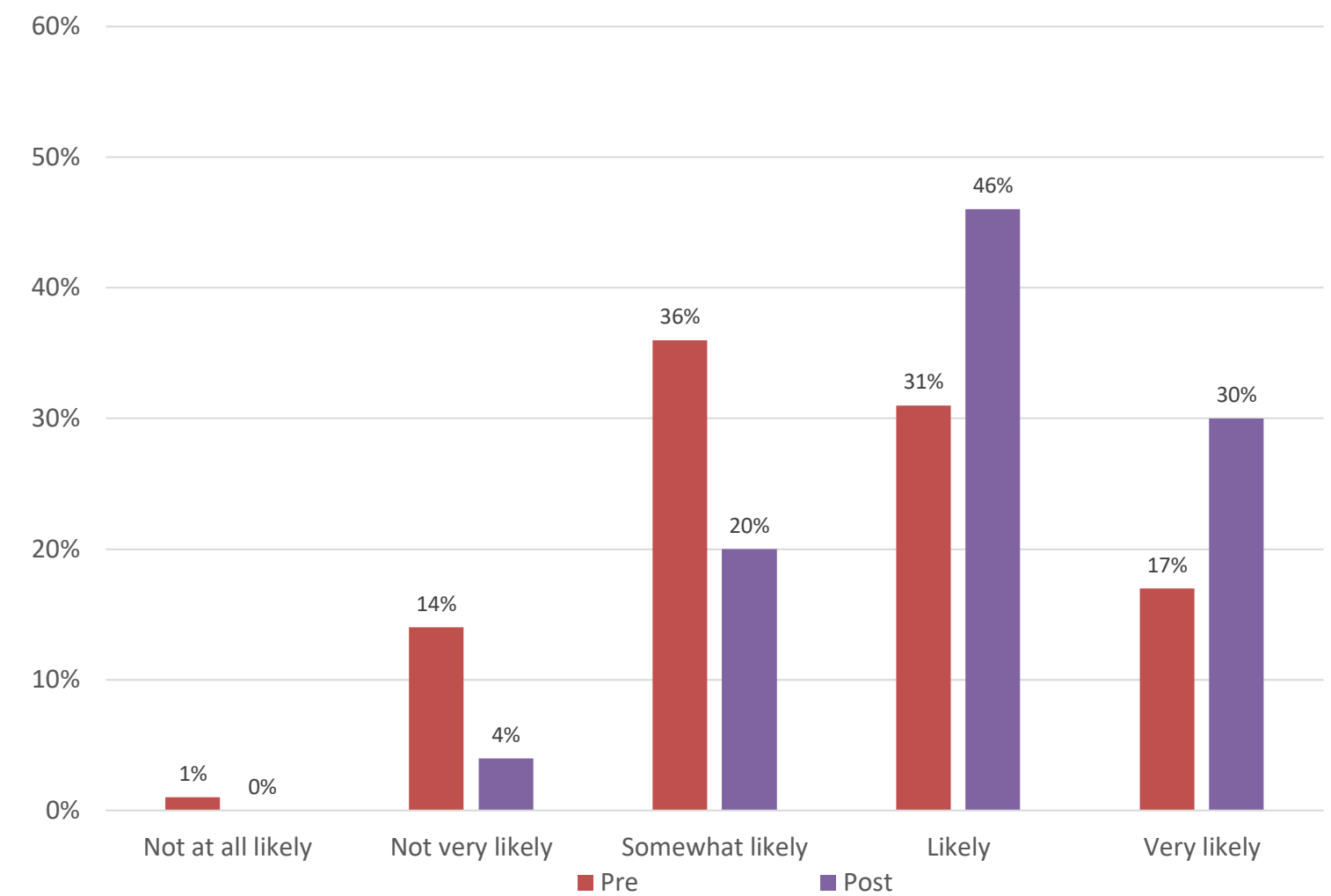


Table 2. Likelihood of inviting acquaintance/co-worker to tell you more about potentially emotional situation (n=308)





# Train the Trainer (T4T)

- 16 Train-the-Trainers
- 96 people trained as Regional Trainers
- California, Colorado, Illinois, Maryland, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, Wisconsin, Wyoming
- High demand = increased COMET Faculty



# COMET in the Media

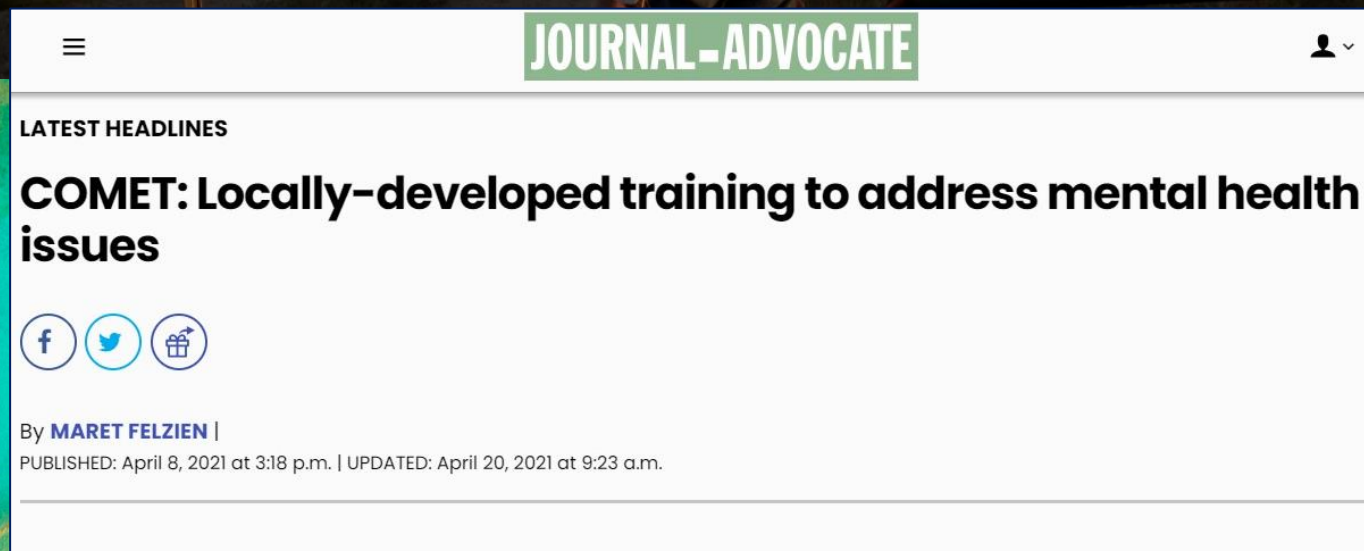


Aching from a string of farmer suicides and other rural mental health challenges, neighbors in eastern Colorado are learning how to check in on one another.



## How Colorado training programs aim to cut mental health care stigma among farmers and ranchers

Hundreds of clinicians, medical professionals and pastors have been trained in early detection, intervention and ways to listen with ears tuned to the stresses and loneliness of rural life.



JOURNAL-ADVOCATE

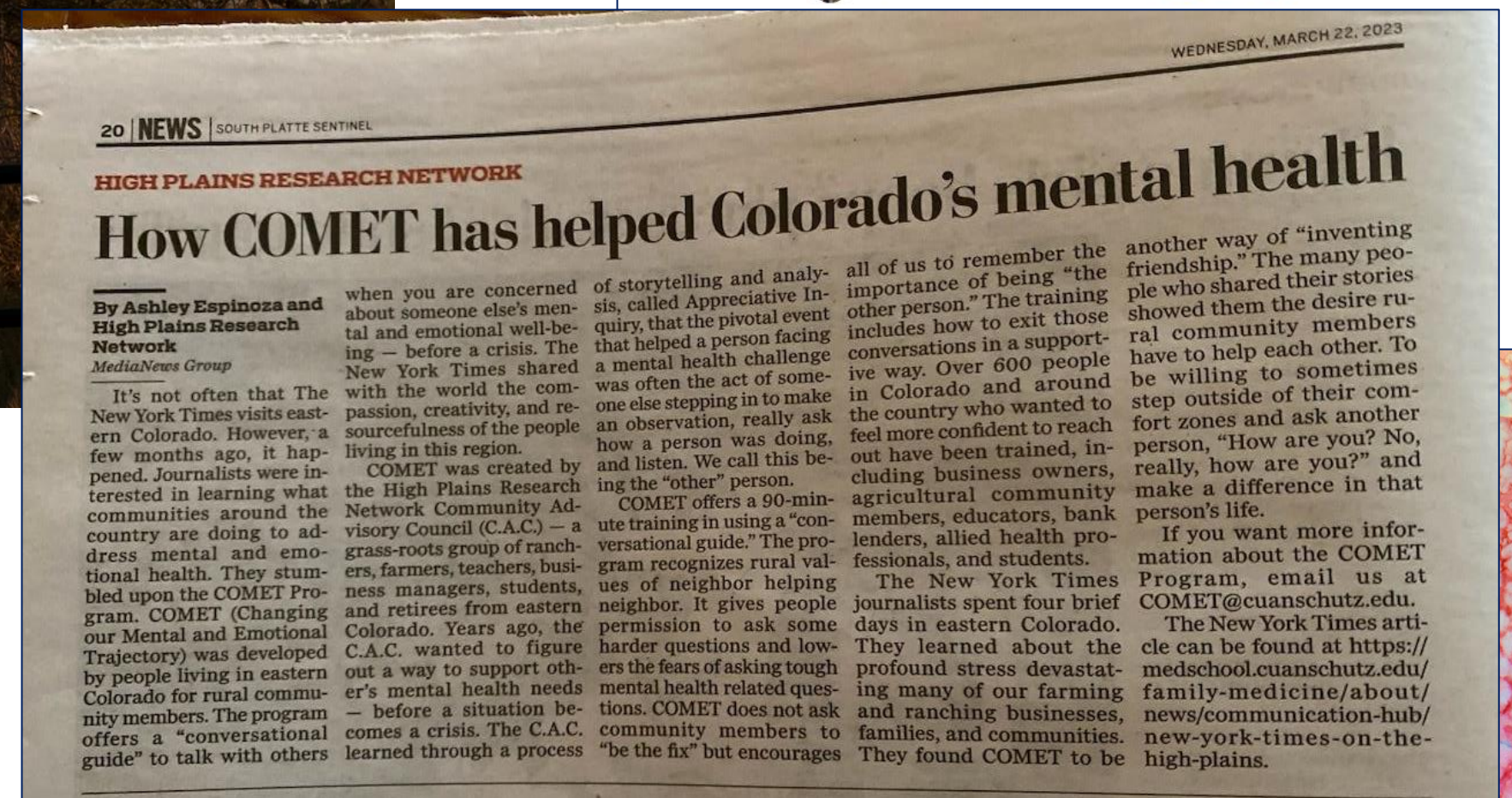
LATEST HEADLINES

## COMET: Locally-developed training to address mental health issues



By MARET FELZIEN |

PUBLISHED: April 8, 2021 at 3:18 p.m. | UPDATED: April 20, 2021 at 9:23 a.m.



20 NEWS | SOUTH PLATTE SENTINEL

HIGH PLAINS RESEARCH NETWORK

## How COMET has helped Colorado's mental health

By Ashley Espinoza and High Plains Research Network

MediaNews Group

It's not often that The New York Times visits eastern Colorado. However, a few months ago, it happened. Journalists were interested in learning what communities around the country are doing to address mental and emotional health. They stumbled upon the COMET Program. COMET (Changing our Mental and Emotional Trajectory) was developed by people living in eastern Colorado for rural community members. The program offers a "conversational guide" to talk with others

when you are concerned about someone else's mental and emotional well-being — before a crisis. The New York Times shared with the world the compassion, creativity, and resourcefulness of the people living in this region.

COMET was created by the High Plains Research Network Community Advisory Council (C.A.C.) — a grass-roots group of ranchers, farmers, teachers, business managers, students, and retirees from eastern Colorado. Years ago, the C.A.C. wanted to figure out a way to support other's mental health needs — before a situation becomes a crisis. The C.A.C. learned through a process

of storytelling and analysis, called Appreciative Inquiry, that the pivotal event that helped a person facing a mental health challenge was often the act of someone else stepping in to make an observation, really ask how a person was doing, and listen. We call this being the "other" person.

COMET offers a 90-minute training in using a "conversational guide." The program recognizes rural values of neighbor helping neighbor. It gives people permission to ask some harder questions and lowers the fears of asking tough mental health related questions. COMET does not ask community members to "be the fix" but encourages

all of us to remember the importance of being "the other person." The training includes how to exit those conversations in a supportive way. Over 600 people in Colorado and around the country who wanted to feel more confident to reach out have been trained, including business owners, agricultural community members, educators, bank lenders, allied health professionals, and students.

The New York Times journalists spent four brief days in eastern Colorado. They learned about the profound stress devastating many of our farming and ranching businesses, families, and communities. They found COMET to be

another way of "inventing friendship." The many people who shared their stories showed them the desire rural community members have to help each other. To be willing to sometimes step outside of their comfort zones and ask another person, "How are you? No, really, how are you?" and make a difference in that person's life.

If you want more information about the COMET Program, email us at [COMET@cuanschutz.edu](mailto:COMET@cuanschutz.edu).

The New York Times article can be found at <https://medschool.cuanschutz.edu/family-medicine/about/news-communication-hub/new-york-times-on-the-high-plains>.



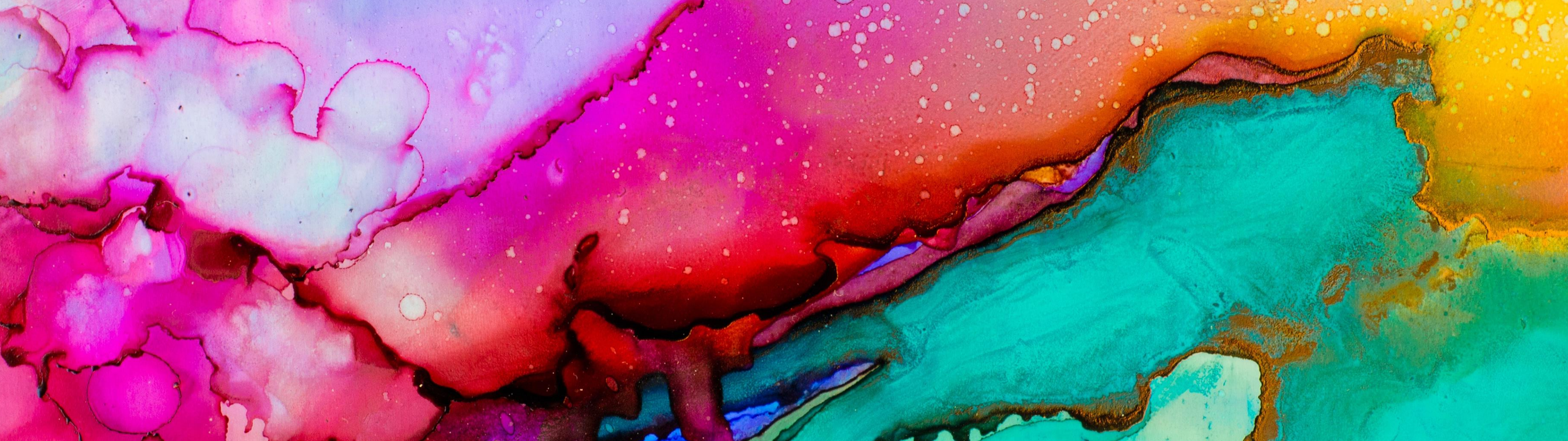


# Field Note Comment:

*“For many people Mental Health First Aid is too complex and goes too deep too quickly. It expects too much from the layperson. Some people need a gentler entry point, and COMET provides that very nicely.”*

– a Regional COMET Trainer





# THANK YOU!

For information about TLC: [HighPlainsTLC@cuanschutz.edu](mailto:HighPlainsTLC@cuanschutz.edu)

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