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El Pomar Foundation Recognizes 20 Years of Pioneering Regional Partnerships Program

Unique community-informed grant initiative has helped triple the number of grants supporting Colorado's rural communities

Colorado Springs, CO – December 9, 2024 – Founded in 1937 by Spencer and Julie Penrose, El Pomar Foundation was established as a private foundation to make grants in support of the well-being of the people of Colorado. For more than 87 years, the Foundation has done this through its statewide grant making and charitable programs totaling more than \$700 million. In 2003, the Foundation committed to increasing its investment and relationships across the state by engaging local voices in its grant making through a unique program called *Regional Partnerships*. Now 20 years in, this program has become a cornerstone of the Foundation's grant initiatives and will be enhanced with additional resources in 2025.

In late 2023, El Pomar celebrated the 20th anniversary of Regional Partnerships. This trailblazing program decentralizes a portion of the Foundation's grant making by engaging local community members across the state to recommend grants in their respective regions. Currently, with more than 70 community leaders serving as regional council members in 11 regions across Colorado, the program helps the Foundation build relationships with local communities and deploy resources to address and more effectively serve the needs of Colorado's varied regions.

In the 20 years of Regional Partnerships, regional councils' recommendations have led to nearly 3,300 grants to more than 1,100 individual organizations, in all 64 counties, totaling nearly \$34.5 million. The impact has also been seen in the Foundation's core competitive application process. Recently completed analysis confirms in the 20-year period since the program's inception, the Foundation's total number of rural grant applications increased by 124%, number of grants awarded to rural applicants increased by 209%, and dollars awarded to rural communities increased by 86%, compared with these totals in the 20-year period prior. This has created a seismic shift in the total number of the Foundation's annual grants awarded from principally urban to principally rural.

"Over the years, and in large part thanks to the Regional Partnerships program, the Foundation has been able to triple the number of grants to rural Colorado," says Maureen Lawrence, El Pomar Senior Vice President, General Counsel, and Regional Partnerships Program Officer. "The fundamental principle of the program is that those individuals who live and work in a particular community are going to know best what their needs are and how the Foundation's resources can address those needs."

[INFOGRAPHIC: 20 Years of Regional Partnerships](#)

History of Regional Partnerships Program

In 2003, El Pomar Foundation sought to create a mechanism that would deepen the Foundation's impact through grant making across the state, notably in Southern Colorado and rural communities, which had historically received fewer grants than more urban communities along Colorado's Front Range. The Foundation also recognized it did not have the expertise in these communities and therefore sought to build a network of local community voices to inform the Foundation's grant making across the state. Over a several

year period, the Foundation began establishing regional councils. By 2012, the Foundation operated 11 regional councils that cover all 64 of Colorado's counties.

"Our founders Spencer and Julie Penrose established the mission to enhance, encourage, and promote the current and future well-being of the people of Colorado, and this program fueled this mission well beyond our expectations," said El Pomar President and CEO, Kyle H. Hybl.

This place-based model convenes a council of local leaders within each region with a deep understanding of their communities, totaling more than 70 individuals around the state. Regional Council members have a history of community engagement; come from diverse backgrounds in the business, nonprofit, and public sectors, as well as elected offices and are knowledgeable about the needs of their communities. Each regional council provides up to \$200,000 in grant recommendations to El Pomar's Trustees annually, with the potential for a combined annual impact of more than \$2.2 million statewide.

El Pomar Northwest Regional Council member, Dana Duran said, "Instead of people coming in and saying, 'Okay community, here's how you can do better,' El Pomar says, 'Okay, community, how can you do better?' And how can we be a partner in that?"

A Unique Model

Because of the Regional Partnerships program, El Pomar has grown its rural grant making and built relationships with communities across Colorado. The Foundation's Trustees, leadership team, and Fellows all participate in regional council work, creating meaningful connections in the regions they support. This includes quality time spent in the regions, getting to know people, places, organizations, and issues.

"El Pomar has an important role to play, because of the grant dollars we can provide in the region, but also our physical presence," says El Pomar Board Chair Dave Palenchar. "By going out into the regions, listening to our regional council members, observing their concerns and their interests, it really helps balance out our understanding of the state."

The uniqueness of the program benefits the Foundation's work in other ways as well. For example, when El Pomar's Colorado Assistance Fund is activated in times of crisis, such as during COVID, in response to wildfires, and in the wake of the 2008 Great Recession, regional councils are invaluable in quickly identifying organizations and initiatives in each corner of the state where funding can be deployed immediately. With a connected network of community leaders, the councils are also a resource to each other for creative cross-region solution-building.

This unique model of engaging local leaders, together with a broad base of staff and Trustees, leads to valuable firsthand knowledge about the various needs of each region around the state, and ultimately to more informed and effective grant making.

According to El Pomar Southeast Regional Council member, Melanie Bravo, "The Regional Partnerships program has done so much to elevate the critical rural voice, which we absolutely need, not only in philanthropy but in all sectors."

Looking to the Future

With the tremendous success of Regional Partnerships, the Foundation now looks to future opportunities for expanded impact. Beginning in 2025, the Foundation will increase the annual regional grant allocations to the program by more than \$1 million and will bolster its presence within its regions across the state to deepen connections and further collaborate with communities, organizations, and councils. This will increase the program's total annual impact from \$2.27 million to a potential for more than \$3.61 million and continue to build upon community engagement.

Maureen Lawrence added, “Through this program, and through the grant partners identified by our regional councils, El Pomar is able to become a strategic partner to nonprofits across the state that are addressing some of our most daunting challenges. We will continue to trust local leaders to help advise the Foundation on how our grant making can be more effective.”

More information about Regional Partnerships can be found [here](#) and on El Pomar’s [website](#), including examples of notable regional funding projects.

About El Pomar Foundation

El Pomar Foundation is one of the largest and oldest private foundations in Colorado, contributing approximately \$25 million annually through grants in the areas of arts & culture, civic & community initiatives, education, health, and human services. In addition, to create a multiplying effect beyond grant making, the Foundation operates community stewardship and leadership development programs to support Colorado nonprofit organizations, as well as three historic properties: Penrose House Conference Center, Penrose Heritage Museum, and Will Rogers Shrine of the Sun. Spencer and Julie Penrose founded El Pomar in 1937 with the mission to enhance, encourage, and promote the current and future well-being of the people of Colorado. Since 1937, the Foundation has made more than 25,000 grants totaling more than \$600 million to approximately 5,000 Colorado nonprofits and invested nearly \$140 million in programs. With assets of more than \$700 million, this represents a total of \$1.4 billion in grants, programs, and assets for the people of Colorado.

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