



## From the Director's Desk

# The Wages of Change

Through June, I spent hours on the phone with colleagues across the state, mostly HR and finance directors from our region--while performing a wage range analysis for each of our positions at NWCCOG. A detailed comparison analysis had not been done by our organization in over a decade. Fortunately, many of our member jurisdictions were generous in sharing their recent work. It was interesting to issue the [Mountain Migration](#) report and do this analysis on the heels of this strange COVID year, all of which provided a lot of opportunity to contemplate the state of work and wages—both of which are in flux.

For those who think that “workplaces and wages will just return to normal” there is a reckoning on the horizon. Workers have awakened to their value, and options. Local governments and other employers who don’t adapt will suffer.

One sign is a recent LinkedIn post from a member county “advertising” that they offer health care benefits for as low as \$65/month for employees. This was posted without a specific job.

On the wage range work, from what I can tell, most of our member organizations (local governments) have been gearing up for an increasingly competitive labor market by bumping up wages while keeping robust benefits packages. Some of the Counties in our region that are most aggressive about talent acquisition offer what are eye-popping wages to my lagging budget mindset. I still have not fully adapted from the 2008- 2018 downturn when employees felt fortunate to retain a job. Those high wages are especially apparent for director and top leadership positions which are now above what used to be the one or two highest wages at counties for many years.



Even with wage adjustments, there are rumblings of a high level of burnout and attrition from 16-plus months of crisis management. Boomers are still hanging on working longer than they had planned because of uncertain and less than robust returns on retirement plans in recent years. There will be a storm that relieves all this buildup, and local governments are likely to be impacted by turnover from professional staff that are increasingly difficult to replace at any reasonable wage given the cost of living in Colorado and in the high country specifically. This is not just a mountain community phenomenon.

One workforce “mystery” being discussed is that jobs are going unfilled while unemployment remains high. Tamara Chuang in the Colorado Sun, in [“What’s Working: Denver Business Leaders Say \\$45,000 is the new ‘scrape-by’ wage.”](#) notes that there has been a lot of discussion among business leaders about whether the issue is too few workers or poor pay, especially for the many rank and file positions that keep our economy and businesses afloat. People I speak with say it is both. Most of us don’t want to be ‘scrape-by’ employers hiring ‘scrape-by’ employees. The work is too important for that mindset.

Attributing this to the increased payouts for unemployment and other increased pandemic relief to citizens this past year, [some governors are putting the pinch on those benefits](#) in an effort to push people back to work. That may work, but it is backwards thinking if you are hiring talent, not just a body. Our partners at The Colorado Department of Labor insist that few people are choosing unemployment because it is a viable substitute for an actual job.

Well, yes; but COVID contemplations—from an overworked job post or “between jobs” on the couch—apparently led to many re-evaluations past year about work. This does not bode well for our tourism based economy.

[The Wall Street Journal](#) is reporting that [“Customers are Back at Restaurants and Bars, but Workers Have Moved On.”](#) These are often transition jobs for folks, and it seems that many have decided to move on to the next thing. This should be unsettling to service and tourism-oriented businesses in the Colorado high country that perennially rely on many workers choosing to be “underemployed” just for the experience, because “they can.” Increasingly, it appears that they can’t. Or they “won’t.”

[The Guardian](#) has framed a Burger King in Nebraska closing because all the workers walked out as sign of a trend—the beginning of the great resignation era. They may be on to something. It is possible that workers may flex their muscles in ways that we have not seen for a long time. It may be the next civil rights awakening – (again) long after unions broke through with many workers rights, workers seem to have forgotten their cumulative power to drive change. In the meantime, the workplace was largely left to Wall Street and to CEOs who, predictably feathered their own beds. This is one of many reasons we have such income disparity. Workers of middle income are beginning to notice.

Studying wage ranges among our peers at NWCCOG, many employers have taken note, but many local businesses don’t have an option of goosing wages up to stay viable. These are not the employers whose CEOs are on the Forbes list, or whose stock option packages make news. The crunch is just as hard for many local employers as it is their employees. What this means cumulatively for our communities is yet to be seen. Something has got to give. And it will.

COVID made many people rethink their place of employment. The [Mountain Migration](#) report issued by NWCCOG and CAST this past month points to how many higher-income earners found new lives in our mountain communities, bringing their work and families with them. It also has data about how this has impacted these places. The losers appear to be those workers who don’t have niche jobs that provide enough income to hold on.

COVID made many people contemplate the value calculus of their employment in relation to their life purpose, their lifestyle and the hard economics of what it means to get by. This is something happening to workers across the economic spectrum, and it is likely to have real consequences.

*Jon Stavney*

Executive Director NWCCOG

## The Risks of “Going” Back to Work

Remembering 18 months ago, the first time we were all on a new platform called Zoom. It was weird, and cool all at the same time. Some of us struggled to learn the technology, some said it won’t work – “I can’t see the body language”, “I can’t “read” the room”, “how are we going to share documents”, “how can we possibly be as productive as before”, “why is so and so never on camera” and most importantly “who the heck is going to get the donuts!?”

We adapted. Fast forward and we find people complaining about having to get dressed of all things! It no longer seems sane to commute 30 minutes each way for ONE face-to-face meeting. What a colossal waste of time and carbon. “Why can’t we just keep our zoom calls?” They’re efficient, everyone can participate, they save time – and best of all – I can get an apple instead of a doughnut ... if I wanted to.

In tourist towns with strong hospitality industries that require workers to be face-to-face to provide that great customer service we all yearned for during the Pandemic, it makes sense that essential workers need to be right there on the front line. But what about “office” workers? Employers are struggling to define what that means these days and what they are going to allow versus require from their employees.

Will employers require their employees be physically at their



location, continue to allow for remote work, or decide on some in-between hybrid. [One poll](#) found that nearly 66 percent of workers wanted to return to a physical office – and nearly half said they miss their commute. In the same poll, 84% of workers reported remote work as being more productive and resulted in a more positive sense of well-being. Can both be true?

Yes, there are people who miss their commute. In the June 9<sup>th</sup> article in the Atlantic, [The Psychological Benefits of Commuting to Work](#), Jerry Useem suggests that people may actually be yearning for that “real commute” – not the fuzzy one from the

kitchen table to the new office in the basement, but the commute that sends the message that is time to gear up for work. Then at the end of the day – it’s time to gear down the drive provides essential depressurization time. He indicates the delineation of time through commuting is essential to our health. In Useem’s research, he suggests that remote working may be more beneficial to the employer and less to the employee. The boundaries blur between when a worker is available for work and when they are not. Without an official commute to set the boundary, employees work longer hours and are more susceptible to burn out and feelings of frustration. He goes on to say – all is not lost. If one gives up the commute for good, then develop strategies that those delineate – now I am at work, now I am not. Maybe change clothes.

Another Atlantic article, [There’s a Perfect Number of Days to Work from Home, and it’s 2](#) .Amanda Mull suggests there is an opportunity for hybrid work strategies, one that allows for the advantages of working face-to-face with co-workers while also allowing uninterrupted time at home when working on a solo project. She agrees with Useem’s contention that many remote workers not only miss their commute, but also miss the impromptu engagement that can only happen when people are in the same place at the same time. In other words, at the office.

While many companies have announced an end to remote work, others are completely rethinking that strategy – in part, because some remote workers have pushed back on returning. The flexibility working remotely affords, is enough to make workers wonder if going back to the office full time is worth it to them. More and more, workers seem to be in the cat bird seat - especially now when they’ve moved to live in places that essential to their new quality of life.

Mull warns employers, “We’re in a rare moment when American office workers are likely to have significant leverage over their working conditions—in a recent survey, [well over half](#) of middle-income workers said they were considering switching jobs this year, and for most of them, remote flexibility would be a factor.”

Employers have a lot to think about relative to their workforce – competitive wages, a hot labor market, remote versus in person work requirements – and now another new COVID variant that puts it all at risk once again.

## State Focus on Green House Gas pollution reduction impacts NWCCOG Energy Programs

NWCCOG Energy program is well positioned for legislation moving dollars towards their core competencies. Program staff have been gearing up with new staff, trainings and systems to meet the challenge of a growing program.

As the Colorado General Assembly wrapped up its 2021 session, one obvious priority for Colorado is to reduce GHG pollution which will improve indoor air quality, protect consumers, drive rural economic development, and support high-paying jobs. [Several senate bills](#) promoting energy efficiency throughout the state, also come with an additional \$40million to the Colorado Energy Office who allocates funds to the NWCCOG Energy Program. The Energy program includes the Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP), the Colorado Affordable Residential Energy program (CARE), the Crisis Intervention Program (CIP), and the Beneficial Electrification program (BEECH). Funds for the 2021/2022 program year have been allocated to each of these programs to expand the reach we have in our Region and surrounding areas. It enables us to hire additional installers, provide training for the installation of new technologies, to impact additional home and residences and to improve the overall energy efficiencies of qualified homes.



As explained in the January [2021 Newsletter](#), BEECH was the cutting edge collaboration between Eagle County, Northwest Colorado Council of Governments (NWCCOG), Energy Smart Colorado, Holy Cross Energy (HCE), and the Colorado Energy Office (CEO) that was successfully tested on 5 mobile homes in the Dotsero Mobile Home Park. The idea of Beneficial Electrification is to remove all fossil fuel appliances and heating systems from the home and replace them with high efficiency electrically powered appliances and heating systems. Improving the insulation and the performance of the building shell is also a key component. The project's overwhelming achievement garnered interest and is now being expanded to other areas within the state and our region.

According to Nate Speerstra, Manager NWCCOG Energy Program, "It's amazing really. We started with 5 homes, now we're funded to modify the rest of the homes in the park. The way the teams have come together to improve so many elements – like improved quality of life for the residents (they actually have working air conditioning now!), home energy savings, indoor air quality, fixed gas leaks – now the whole state will be part of beneficial electrification."

[Eight bills](#) adopted by this past legislative session focus on moving Colorado forward to reducing GHG pollution 22% by 2030. According to Governor Polis "The [Greenhouse Gas Pollution Reduction Roadmap](#) published by the State in January 2021, represents the most action-oriented, ambitious and substantive planning process that Colorado has ever undertaken on climate leadership, pollution reduction and a clean energy transition."

Asked about how they plan to spend the extra funds that are being made available to the Energy Program, Doug Jones, NWCCOG Program Director, said, "The cool thing about this additional funding, is that not only will we be able to afford to add employees and raise wages for our installers, we'll be able to train them on the newest technology, improve overall energy efficiency in homes in our community, and we'll be participating in the expansion of beneficial electrification in the entire state. This will mean additional job growth, extended opportunities for advancements for our employees, new skills, and an expanded economy. We're really proud to be a part of this."

The Energy program is currently seeking candidates to fill a variety of positions which can be found on our [website](#).

**Image: Doug Jones presenting the Beneficial Electrification project to members of Holy Cross Energy, CORE, Eagle County and Walking Mountain Science Center. Photo Credit: Jon Stavney**

## NWCCOG Economic Development District Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDs) Five Year Update now available for public comment until August 25

### Northwest Colorado Council of Governments Economic Development District **[DRAFT] Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy 2021 - 2026**



Eagle, Grand, Jackson, Pitkin, Summit counties in the State of Colorado



Peak One/Summit County

Northwest Colorado Council of Governments became an Economic Development District under the auspices of the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) in 2012. NWCCOG EDD is one of six in the State of Colorado, and one of 384 in the United States. The NWCCOG EDD receives funding every year to build capacity in our region to meet our regional economic development goals. The Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDs) is

the cornerstone of this program. The NWCCOG EDD is responsible for facilitating the development, implementation, and revision of our region's CEDs. A region's CEDs must be updated every 5 years.

The Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDs) is a locally-based, regionally-driven economic development planning process that creates the space for our region to identify its strengths and weaknesses and brings together a diverse set of partners to develop goals and objectives which aim to generate good jobs, diversify the economy, and create economic stability and prosperity. This CEDs planning process has engaged a range of partners, including town and county governments, community leaders, residents, chambers of commerce, the private sector, educational institutions, federal and state partners, and other stakeholders in planning for our region's future. Our CEDs planning process identifies locally-grown strategies that will guide regional economic development, encourage partnerships and collaboration, and improve economic outcomes and overall quality of life in the NWCCOG Region.

# Vintage News

## New Partnership Helps Colorado's Older Adults Improve their Balance, for FREE

In an effort to help older adults improve their balance and decrease their risk of falling, the Vintage, the Region 12 Area Agency on Aging, has partnered with Nymbl Science, the maker of an innovative balance training application, Nymbl. On July 1st, Nymbl's at-home digital balance training solution app became available for free to the first 1,500 older adults age 60 and older in Colorado who register by 1) downloading the 'Nymbl Training' app, or 2) registering online at [co.fallsfree.com](http://co.fallsfree.com). Older adults who sign up will receive a personalized balance training program conveniently downloaded on their smartphone or tablet via the Nymbl Training app.

Every 11 seconds, an older adult is treated in the emergency room for a fall and every 19 minutes, an older adult dies from a fall, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. COVID19 has added to the challenges faced by older adults in the last year, as most are spending more time indoors, resulting in declines in both balance and physical strength. In Colorado, it's estimated that 585,000 older adults are in the high-risk category for falls, but with the proper measures, including balance training, many of these falls may be prevented.

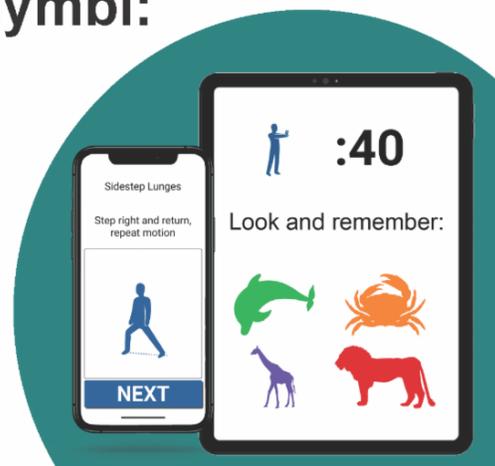
Nymbl and Vintage want Colorado's older adults to have full access to safe and effective fall prevention, in the comfort and privacy of their own homes. Registration is easy and secure and Nymbl is fully covered by the partnership with Vintage and the state of Colorado for older adults over age 60. Science has reported that by using their app, balance improves by 30%, and 79% of their users felt confident that they would not lose their balance in their own home. Registration is super easy and free!

The Nymbl app only asks for a name, birth date, gender and zip code to verify eligibility. Reserve your spot now by 1) downloading the 'Nymbl Training' app, or 2) visiting [co.fallsfree.com](http://co.fallsfree.com).

## Improve your balance with the *free* Nymbl app

### 2 easy ways to get Nymbl:

- Download the Nymbl Training app, or
- Visit: [co.fallsfree.com](http://co.fallsfree.com)



# 13th annual Caregiver Conference



## Best Practices in Dementia Care:

*Building Hands-On Skills  
for Communication  
& Interactions*

Teepa Snow, with *A Positive Approach to Care*, is a worldwide leading advocate and educator of dementia and other brain change. Join us for an interactive lecture and discussion for caregivers and professionals.

**Sept 17, 2021**  
**9am-4pm**

For more info including location & how to register:

[www.tinyurl.com/COCaregiver](http://www.tinyurl.com/COCaregiver)

Or call: 970-665-0041

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[NWCCOG.ORG](http://NWCCOG.ORG)

**Next Council Meeting - Thursday, August 26, 2021**

**Full Council and EDD Board Annual Planning Meeting**

**Location:** Zoom Conference Call, On-Site Location TBD

**Time:** Council 10:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m.

**Time:** EDD Board 12:30 p.m. – 2:30 p.m.

**Primary Agenda Items:** Strategic Planning for 2022