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Mayor



*City and County of Denver*

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Dear Denver Delegation:

As you know so well, the COVID-19 pandemic is a public health and economic crisis that has left no one untouched. But most of us do not know the life-altering trauma of homelessness. For those already marginalized by the isolation of their circumstances, these turbulent times are even more debilitating.

Very recently, Britta Fisher, the Executive Director of Denver's Department of Housing Stability (HOST) and a team from my office briefed the Governor on what the City and County of Denver has been doing – and will continue to do – to support this increasingly vulnerable population. Most of you are well informed and aware of these challenges, but I'd like to provide you with the opportunity to receive the same briefing we provided for the Governor. The full slide presentation can be accessed [here](#).

To date, as part of Denver's COVID-19 emergency response, we have spent roughly half of our COVID-19 emergency response funding (\$27 million) for outreach, housing, food and shelters to support the health and safety of those experiencing homelessness, allowing us to:

- Open two large 24-hour auxiliary shelters with social distancing protocols, on-site health care and counseling services, meals, snacks, private showers, space for pets, sanitation and storage. The Colorado Coalition for the Homeless was our partner in this work, and city employees have been redeployed to support and sustain this work.
- Secure more than 800 motel rooms for protective action and respite care.
- Expand portable hand-washing stations and restrooms downtown.
- Meet the PPE needs of area service providers.
- Administer COVID-19 testing and screening, which we will continue to do.

While the challenge is daunting, Denver was quick to respond to the emergency and we continue to survey what other cities across the country are doing to maintain the best practices for protecting those experiencing homelessness.

As shelters and charitable services closed in surrounding communities, more vulnerable people have come to Denver to find resources and support. It is difficult to be precise with numbers, but the population of people experiencing homelessness and coming to Denver has significantly increased, particularly those living unsheltered on our streets.

Denver is taking care of many people from other communities right now. We are stepping into this challenge with compassion and intentionality. I want to make sure you, as members of our delegation at the State Capitol, are fully aware of the regional burden we are carrying.

I also want to address the concerns many of you and the constituents we serve have expressed about unsanctioned encampments. I have never believed that outdoor camping is an acceptable response to the challenge of homelessness. The solution to homelessness is housing, and that is why Denver has pursued a "housing first" strategy.

Prior to the pandemic, Denver had already established a long history of extensive and innovative efforts to alleviate the suffering caused by homelessness and involuntary displacement. Over the past 10 years, my administration has helped provide stable housing for 9,200 homeless individuals and families.

My administration established Denver's first dedicated affordable housing fund in 2016 and then doubled it two years later. With 6,000 additional affordable housing units built, funded, or otherwise in the pipeline, we are making a real difference in people's lives.

Our strategy to address homelessness and affordable housing includes an annual investment of \$100 million and Cabinet-level leadership from HOST, which was created just months before the pandemic hit. Specific elements of our approach include:

- Creating a Comprehensive Housing Plan and Three-Year Shelter Strategy;
- Hosting Denver's first tiny home village of 19 units on city-owned land, supporting a 14-home women's village, and amending the zoning code to ease the path for future villages;
- Transforming shelters from nightly triage care into 24/7 operations with careful coordination of operations, capital investments, and service provisions to provide pathways out of shelter and into housing;
- Investing in Denver Day Works, a jobs initiative that has led to permanent employment for hundreds of homeless individuals;
- Launching the [Social Impact Bond](#) (SIB) permanent supporting housing program, which has provided 330 frequent jail utilizers with vouchers and local services. Some 85 percent of participants have remained housed and investors have received payments for three years running;
- Expanding the Temporary Rental and Utility Assistance (TRUA) program by \$4 million allocated through December 2020 to meet growing needs as more Denverites face financial instability. So far, this year, the program has helped more than 1,200 households.

Despite these efforts, the number of unsheltered people living on our streets has at least doubled. The onset of COVID-19 raised new concerns about urban encampments. When the Centers for Disease Control posted guidance discouraging the dispersal of people in encampments, we hit the pause button on enforcing Denver's unauthorized camping ordinance. As indicated above, we immediately set up 24-hour auxiliary shelters with social distancing protocols, and we took several other specific actions:

- Screening, testing and referring people experiencing unsheltered homelessness to our protective action and activated respite rooms;
- Partnering with the Colorado Village Collaborative to establish temporary, managed campsites to provide alternatives to the unsafe encampments that have surfaced throughout Denver.

Recently, we have had to re-evaluate the public health consequences of allowing large unsanctioned encampments to grow in Denver. We have found significant public health and safety problems in some of these encampments. The CDC's guidance is guidance only and makes allowance for public health authorities to close encampments when other public health risks are evidenced.

The process we employ for encampment closures involves extensive outreach by human services, mental health and public health officials. In a recent engagement at Morey Middle School in the Capitol Hill neighborhood, city agencies connected with more than two dozen individuals who were willing to accept service options that are safer and more sustainable. This is painstaking human-to-human work. Not everyone accepts these services and we must acknowledge that every person experiencing homelessness is a unique individual, and in some cases, multiple efforts must be undertaken to secure trust and a willingness to take full advantage of city and partner agency services. Multiple city agencies and staff are coordinated to provide notice and supportive services before any unsanctioned encampment closure is undertaken. People's belongings are not trashed and we make every effort to provide alternatives to outdoor tent-living.

We have also endorsed a ballot initiative I hope you will also support in November's upcoming election. This proposed ballot measure will raise approximately \$40 million per year to address homelessness with a 0.25% sales tax (2.5 cents per \$10 purchase). This funding will support expanded housing resources such as capital, rental assistance and supportive services, greater shelter capacity, quality-of-life improvements and added services including case management and counseling for those in most need of these services.

Finally, as I put it in the State of the City address, there is an uncomfortable truth about the challenge of homelessness in our society. It's the same truth underlying the challenge of income inequality, a hollowed-out middle class, an alarming disparity in access to opportunity, and the challenges of mental health and poverty. These issues underpin homelessness in America, and their resolution cries out for a coordinated national, state and regional response.

Thank you for your consideration and interest in these issues. I invite you and others you may know who are interested in what Denver is doing to consult these resources, and I hope they will inform your public policy and legislative deliberations.

Additional references:

- [Housing an Inclusive Denver](#)
- [Three-year Shelter Strategy](#)
- [Housing Dashboards – Built & Preserved Chart](#)
- [SIB Evaluation](#)
- [2020 Point in Time Report](#)
- [Denver Day Works](#)
- Video: [How Denver Is Using a Housing First Approach to Respond to the Homelessness Crisis](#)

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Hancock', with a horizontal line extending to the right.

Michael B. Hancock  
Mayor