

Wednesday, March 6, 2019

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## Homeless Leadership Council Statement on the Denver Right to Survive Initiative

Homeless Leadership Council statement regarding the Denver Right to Survive Initiative.

The Council is comprised of leaders of the following organizations:

- Catholic Charities of Denver
- Colorado Coalition for the Homeless
- The Delores Project
- Denver Rescue Mission
- The Gathering Place
- St. Francis Center
- The Salvation Army
- Urban Peak
- Volunteers of America

To whom it may concern,

The Denver Homeless Leadership Council (HLC) is made up of the executives of some of the metro area's largest homeless service providers. Our council meets with the purpose of sharing information, discussing trends, and thinking collectively about how we can continue to work together to address and provide lasting solutions for people experiencing homelessness in Denver. Leadership from the following organizations are represented: Catholic Charities of Denver, Colorado Coalition for the Homeless, The Delores Project, Denver Rescue Mission, The Gathering Place, St. Francis Center, The Salvation Army, Urban Peak and Volunteers of America.

Collectively our organizations have been serving families, individuals and youth experiencing homelessness for over 100 years. Our agencies are mission-driven, client-centered, and solutions-oriented. As service providers and community leaders, the HLC and our respective agencies remain committed to supporting long-term, permanent solutions to homelessness that respect the inherent dignity of all individuals while balancing the needs of the community.

As a council we monitor the community's landscape, including legislation, community trends, and events that impact the highly vulnerable population for whom we advocate, support and assist on their path to self-sufficiency and empowerment. Over the past few months the HLC has examined Initiated Ordinance 300 (Right to Survive Initiative).

*The HLC is not affiliated with the proponents or opposition campaigns. Yet, we do believe we have a vested interest in sharing our concerns and expertise concerning the campaign and the initiative if passed.*

As service providers and advocates for those people who are experiencing homelessness, our perspective on the issue at hand is unique. Therefore, we feel compelled to weigh in and express our concerns because the impact of the initiative and the "no" campaign is doing a disservice to the dignity each and every member of our community, including those who are experiencing homelessness, deserve.

It is our opinion that the impact of the campaign, and then the implementation of the initiative, if approved by the voters, are both detrimental to our clients and our community. According to the most recent campaign finance disclosures, *Together Denver* has already raised \$588,784 to promote their position and campaigns are likely to raise significantly more. Campaign contributions have come from local businesses, business advocacy groups, professional associations and individuals.

As a group we are disappointed that this costly campaign means that financial resources are being diverted from services, and further stigmatizing people experiencing homelessness, instead of investing in the multitude of real solutions that our organizations are providing daily. Collectively, we see increased need for shelter, housing and support services, including unique subpopulations such as women, individuals with cross-disabilities, youth, seniors and LGBTQ populations. The truth is that we are under-resourced and underfunded to scale appropriately to meet demand.

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While Initiative 300, The Right to Survive, would decriminalize certain *essential* behaviors of people experiencing homelessness, the possible unintended consequences are far reaching. We are concerned that if the initiative becomes law, it will lower the prevailing standard of human welfare in our community potentially reducing the expectation of 'need' met by our human service organizations, community members and government. Instead the focus will be sheer physical survival in outdoor spaces that are not suitable for human habitation.

This minimal concept of 'survival' provided by the initiative offers little to improve the welfare or security of the unsheltered homeless community in Denver. Individuals experiencing homelessness will remain susceptible to volatility of life on the streets—exposed to extreme climate, violence, injury, exploitation, and even death. The HLC believes there are more narrowly tailored policy alternatives that would protect individuals experiencing homelessness from discrimination, enhance their trust of law enforcement and service providers, and reduce interactions with the criminal justice system.

As our community responds to the current crisis we witness on the streets and throughout our agencies, the HLC and our respective organizations are committed to a coordinated approach, and to expanding a full continuum of services that are proven to address the complex, but solvable challenge of members of homelessness. Such services include:

- appropriate shelter
- affordable housing
- permanent supportive housing
- support services including behavioral health, workforce development, and increasing employment and income opportunities

The HLC asks that the business community, the city and county of Denver, the voters and our community members further invest in housing, shelter and supportive services. Then join us in enhancing the solutions that are working to end homelessness in Denver. Additionally, we respectfully request that the opponents of Initiative 300 commit to halting the divisive, traumatizing, and stigmatizing activities and campaigns that demonize and disrespect the inherent dignity of all people in our community.

An increased commitment to provide financial resources, community will, collaboration, and policy reform by the city and county of Denver, homeless service providers, housing developers, the business community, neighborhood groups, the faith community, and others seeking long-term solutions will provide a true alternative to the need for a Right to Survive.

We recognize that many Denver citizens are eager to contribute personally to solutions, beyond the proposed ballot measure. It takes our entire community to improve the lives of those at risk who depend on our support so they can thrive. To that end, we encourage individuals to connect with local service providers in their neighborhoods and across the metro area. We ask that our community takes immediate action and join us as donors, volunteers and advocates in support of one of our communities' most vulnerable populations.

Divisive policies and campaigns do not make our community stronger, more welcoming, nor do they improve the welfare for all of us. Each of our organizations have unique experiences and expertise working with various sub populations experiencing homelessness across Denver. For more information on our individual organizations approaches and proposed solutions please contact us directly.

Respectfully,

The Denver Homeless Leadership Council

Council Members: Catholic Charities of Denver, Colorado Coalition for the Homeless, The Delores Project, Denver Rescue Mission, The Gathering Place, St. Francis Center, The Salvation Army, Urban Peak and Volunteers of America.