



LASTING SOLUTIONS TO ADDRESS THE CRISIS OF DENVER HOMELESSNESS

The Colorado Coalition for the Homeless (CCH) believes that the Right to Survive Measure, Initiative 300, has been born out of outrage and frustration by those experiencing homelessness, and those advocating on their behalf, to the criminalization of homelessness, the lack of adequate and accessible emergency shelter and the lack of affordable housing to meet the needs of those currently on the streets or in the shelters of Denver. This situation, coupled with Denver’s Urban Camping Ban ordinance, sweeps by Denver Police Department enforcing that ban, and other laws that criminalize homelessness, has led to a growing number of street encampments affecting more neighborhoods and businesses.

The Colorado Coalition for the Homeless has long advocated for long-term and lasting solutions to ending homelessness in Denver and throughout Colorado. We are concerned that the “solution” of the Right to Survive initiative will have unintended consequences and will not resolve the complex crisis we are experiencing in Denver. We believe that a lasting solution requires an adequate supply of affordable housing, including permanent supportive housing for those with disabling conditions, and a robust emergency response system that has safe, appropriate, and accessible emergency shelter to provide temporary housing until long term housing can be obtained. Further, emergency shelter, bridge housing, permanent supportive and affordable housing must be designed and allocated relevant to the unique needs of *all* who experience homelessness. Particular attention should be directed to women, individuals with cross-disabilities, LGBTQ populations, youth, and seniors.

The current system has failed to provide safe and appropriate alternatives to living on the streets for everyone experiencing homelessness in Denver. CCH does not believe the solution to this failure should be to “institutionalize” encampments and street homelessness through a “right to be left alone” on the streets. CCH believes in long-term, permanent solutions to homelessness that respect the inherent dignity of all individuals while balancing the other needs of the community. Initiative 300 appears to provide a short-term response to frustrations with the current failed system, responding to the symptoms rather than the cause of the problem. Instead, we should strive for more than merely protecting the right of someone to survive on the streets and take action to ensure the right to safe, affordable, and long-term housing with dignity. We should work to eliminate the need for a “right to survive” and the unproductive response of criminalizing the actions necessary to survive outside by providing safe and accessible alternatives to living on the streets.

The current approach to addressing homelessness is under-resourced and inadequate. It is long overdue for the City to identify a dedicated funding source for homelessness services and response. The City and business community must commit to exploring long term funding options to address the needs of the homeless population through legislation or a 2020 ballot measure that identifies a permanent, dedicated, and coordinated funding source of at least \$50 million annually for homelessness services and response.

Until that funding is secured, we propose a five-point plan to immediately address the crisis in the Denver Community:

First, the City, in collaboration with homeless service agencies and advocates for those experiencing homelessness, should develop and fund the expansion of emergency shelter beds which are accessible to those currently on the streets. These beds must address the current barriers to accessing existing shelters, including providing for possessions, partners, and pets. Further the City must explore alternative shelter arrangements for

specialized populations that accommodate their unique needs including shelter options for youth, those suffering from substance use disorders, and those with acute health and mental health care needs. The City must explore models like those developed in San Diego, San Francisco, and Portland for an emergency response to immediately create safe alternatives to street encampments. The City and the community must commit to this action and determine the best fit for Denver immediately.

Second, the City should continue to facilitate conversion, where appropriate, of existing emergency shelters into 24-hour shelter facilities with on-site services designed to help those experiencing crisis to obtain long-term housing as soon as possible. This must be done in collaboration with current service providers in a manner that provides safe alternative spaces for those forced to live outside. The City needs to commit resources and develop an appropriate plan within 3 months.

Third, the City should fund at least 600 “bridge housing” vouchers with housing counseling, case management and other support services including vocational services, dedicated to allowing those currently on the streets to rapidly move into vacant apartments while long-term affordable and supportive housing is developed in accordance with the Denver Affordable Housing plan. The City could use a process similar to the Denver Social Impact Bond which has moved more than 300 individuals from the streets into permanent supportive housing over the past three years. These vouchers could be phased out once construction of the newly created permanent supportive housing is completed and the vouchers are no longer needed. The funds for these vouchers could come from City general fund revenue as well as from the unused Services funding in the Denver Affordable Housing Fund in conjunction with other funds allocated by the City. The estimated cost of these vouchers, with necessary housing counselling and support services, is approximately \$1.2 million annually for each one hundred vouchers. This plan should be put in place immediately.

Fourth, the City must expedite the development of affordable and Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) targeted to those currently on the streets. While the Affordable Housing Plan currently prioritizes the development of housing for the homeless, the current pipeline of projects is not sufficient to address the crisis of growing encampments. The City must create programs and incentives in consultation with the Housing Advisory Committee to encourage and expedite the development of these critical housing units in a way that is not solely reliant on federal and state tax credits. A plan should be put in place within 3 months.

Fifth, the City and the community should commit resources to expand outreach services. Outreach services are an essential bridge between living on the streets and finding long-term housing solutions and these services must at least mirror the needs of the community. We recommend a further investment of \$1.5 million in outreach services to allow for more outreach workers to make those critical connections out in the community and to provide support services that can safely transition people from the streets to long-term housing. The City should make this investment immediately.

Further, we respectfully request that the City and 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. The harassment and criminalization of acts of survival continues to be disruptive and unproductive with long-term damaging results. The City and the community must commit immediately to evidence-driven solutions and productive citizen engagement that can help to foster a stronger and safer community for all Denver residents and businesses.

If we can demonstrate an immediate and real commitment by the City, homeless service providers, housing developers, the business community, people experiencing homelessness, and others seeking long-term solutions, we can alleviate the crisis and frustrations that have led to the Right to Survive initiative