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# Homelessness Ecosystem Analysis Phase 2



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## About the Authors

Each author's contributing section is identified in the table of contents. As a joint project between CU Denver and CSI, with many contributing scholars, any individual's views expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of either organization.

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**Peter LiFari** is a CSI 2021 Terry J. Stevinson Fellow and co-authored the July report, "From Conflict to Compassion: A Colorado Housing Development Blueprint for Transformational Change." Peter is the Executive Director of Maiker Housing Partners. Maiker, an owner, operator, and developer of affordable housing communities in Adams County, CO, collaborates with other Housing Authorities to collectively work toward the overarching mission of the industry to create attainable and sustainable housing and communities for vulnerable families and individuals.

**Lili Valis** graduated from the University of Colorado Boulder in 2019 with a B.A. in Political Science and a minor in Business Administration. She moved to Washington, D.C. after graduation where she worked in business development. After coming back to Denver, she joined Common Sense Institute as a Research Analyst before she will join the United States Air Force through the Officer Training program in September 2021.

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### **Special Thanks**

We would like to thank first and foremost, the many individuals who are working to end homelessness every day. We also would like to thank all who participated in this study and who provided feedback to help us more accurately describe to our community what challenges you deal with in your daily work.

Lidet Birhanu, Marie Evans, Erin Christon, Stephanie Chesler, and Dr. Kristin Wood for their contributions to community outreach, interviews, and background data collection that informed this report.

### **About Inworks-CMTC**

Inworks is an innovation initiative of the University of Colorado Denver | Anschutz Medical Campus. A home for creators, thinkers, designers, and makers, we're a collaborative community of learners and leaders committed to solving humanity's most pressing problems. In our two state-of-the-art prototyping labs, we draw on expertise from many disciplines to create unique solutions to real-world challenges. At Inworks, we learn and teach through making, but we don't just make things – we make them matter.

Established to be the premier scholarly hub for Design Innovation (DI) thinking, research, and practice, CU Denver's Comcast Media and Technology Center (CMTC) uses an interdisciplinary methodology combined with academic theories for application in a practical setting. Fully embracing our expertise in cutting edge DI research and leveraging our unparalleled access to the exceptional colleges at the University of Colorado Denver, we aim to embody the spirit of collaboration by connecting across fields of study, disciplines, industry, and government. When this unique approach is applied to critical communal challenges, it results in the production of awe-inspiring solutions in engineering, art, design, and entrepreneurship.

### **About Common Sense Institute**

Common Sense Institute is a non-partisan research organization dedicated to the protection and promotion of Colorado's economy. CSI is at the forefront of important discussions concerning the future of free enterprise in Colorado and aims to have an impact on the issues that matter most to Coloradans.

CSI's mission is to examine the fiscal impacts of policies, initiatives, and proposed laws so that Coloradans are educated and informed on issues impacting their lives.

CSI employs rigorous research techniques and dynamic modeling to evaluate the potential impact of these measures on the Colorado economy and individual opportunity.

Common Sense Institute was founded in 2010 originally as Common Sense Policy Roundtable. CSI's founders were a concerned group of business and community leaders who observed that divisive partisanship was overwhelming policymaking and believed that sound economic analysis could help Coloradans make fact-based and common sense decisions.

## Project Overview

**Phase 1:** Common Sense Institute partnered with CU Denver, the Downtown Denver Partnership, Together Denver and other local associations and business leaders to conduct an economic analysis of the organizations serving individuals experiencing homelessness within the city of Denver and the broader seven-county Metro Denver region. The initial phase of the project included the compilation of current resources dedicated to the various parts of the homelessness ecosystem for the purpose of understanding the economic footprint.

**Phase 2:** In the second phase of the project, CSI partnered with CU Denver to engage with the local community and chart drivers and outcomes. The team captured and mapped the ways in which each organization impacts various system dynamics. In addition to providing clarity around the roles of organizations in the ecosystem, this model reveals which factors have outsized impacts and provides insights into where additional interventions and investments might address the root causes of persistent problems and accelerate the positive dynamics within the system. Through this analysis, CSI and CU Denver developed a prioritized set of recommendations with the goal of maximizing total impact.

This report represents the culmination of the work conducted during Phase 2 of this project. First, a summary of the Phase 1 findings is presented, followed by several parts: 1) systems mapping analysis and recommendations; 2) case studies; and 3) a brief on homelessness and housing affordability.

# Phase I Economic Analysis Summary

**Authors: Lili Valis and Brenda Dickhoner**

The Phase I report, [The Economic Footprint of Homelessness in Metro Denver](#), found that nearly half a billion dollars is spent annually on shelters, supportive services, health care and public assistance for individuals experiencing homelessness in the Metro Denver area. Within the city and county of Denver the figure approaches \$447 million. These estimates are likely undercounting the full breadth of spending on this issue. The figures only include financial information that was available and do not capture the full array of charitable organizations, religious organizations, public agencies or health care and emergency responders that are dedicated to serving people experiencing homelessness. The analysis of annual expenditures includes only a partial list of municipal agencies engaged on this issue within Denver, Boulder and Aurora, and does not include any city or county agencies in other areas of Metro Denver. While Denver Health costs (\$176 million) are included, other regional and local hospital and health care costs are not included.

These estimates begin to shed light on the systemwide resources available to resolving homelessness. There is a growing demand on public resources and increasing scrutiny on public policy. An understanding of the existing resources – fiscal, human, and otherwise – can help launch a conversation about how the Metro Denver region can better connect individuals and families experiencing homelessness with stable housing and wraparound support. As the number of people experiencing homelessness continues to rise and as communities recover from COVID-19, now is a critical time to assess the ecosystem.

## Phase I Economic Footprint Summary

- The 2020 Point in Time (PIT) count, which provides a snapshot of the population experiencing homelessness in the region, counted 6,104 people experiencing homelessness on Jan. 27, 2020 in Metro Denver (covering the counties of Adams, Arapahoe, Boulder, Broomfield, Denver, Douglas and Jefferson). 4,171 of those individuals were living within the boundaries of the city and county of Denver, representing 68% of the region total.<sup>i</sup>
- Due to COVID-19, the 2021 PIT unsheltered count was not conducted, leaving an unclear picture of how the pandemic has affected the homeless population overall. However, the 2021 PIT count of people staying at emergency shelters revealed a 40 percent increase over the prior year.
- Within the Metro Denver region, at least \$481.2 million is spent annually on shelters, services, emergency response and healthcare for individuals experiencing homelessness.
  - Out of the total estimate of \$481.2 million, approximately \$434 million is spent within the City of Denver, while approximately \$15.9 million is spent with the City of Boulder and approximately \$7.8 million is spent within the City of Aurora.

- For a population ranging from 4,171 to 10,428, these expenditures equate to a range of \$41,679 per person to \$104,201 per individual experiencing homelessness in the City of Denver.
  - In comparison, the per-pupil spending in K-12 schools in Denver Public Schools in 2019 was \$19,202 for a total school population of 87,644.
- The estimated \$481.2 million in expenditures likely capture some revenues flowing from the 2020 Cares Act to organizations in the Metro Denver region, given the report focused on FY 2020 expenditures from charitable organizations. The \$481.2 million amount, however, does not include COVID-19 federal stimulus funding from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), which was enacted in March 2021 and provided \$29.4 million for the HOME Investment Partnerships Program.
  - Additionally, the state has proposed to use \$550 million of the \$3.8 billion in state funds received from ARPA for the purpose of affordable housing.<sup>ii</sup> It is expected that some portion of this will go towards supporting people experiencing homelessness. Colorado has also put state funds toward the Colorado Rescue Plan, under which \$15 million has been allocated to purchasing hotel rooms for unhoused individuals and \$13 million is allocated for affordable housing project incentives.<sup>iii</sup>

### **Additional Impacts of Homelessness**

The Phase I economic analysis of homelessness considered the direct expenditures by charitable organizations and government agencies to provide services and support to people experiencing homelessness. The homelessness crisis also impacts surrounding aspects of the economy that are less easily quantified. For example, tourism can be impacted if cities are perceived to be unsafe, local businesses may lose revenue if encampments or individuals experiencing homelessness are driving away customers, and water sanitation and stormwater drainage can be negatively impacted by growing numbers of encampments that do not have access to bathroom facilities.

#### ***Tourism***

Convention organizers are known to be selective about where they host events, and they will bypass cities with perceived safety issues and or cities that lack quality experiences. Independent travelers are also known to take into consideration the safety and cleanliness of destinations when making travel plans. Statewide tourism spending in Colorado amounted to \$24.2 billion in 2019. With COVID-19, the tourism industry took a significant hit as related spending went down to \$15.4 billion in 2020. Of the 2019 amount, \$21.7 billion is estimated to have come from spending by visitors.

If tourism declines a mere 1%, the direct loss in tourism spending based on pre-pandemic, normal travel years would be \$217 million. Using the PI+ model developed by REMI to run a simulation, that 1% drop in tourism spending would



cost over 2,530 jobs statewide and over \$387 million in total output. This translates to a reduction in GDP of \$229 million, or -0.055% of the state's economy.

A specific instance of homelessness affecting business tourism in Seattle provides an example of the quantifiable indirect impact to the economy. In a 2018 letter sent to the leaders of the convention and tourism organization Visit Seattle, organizers of a large national convention criticized the street atmosphere surrounding the convention center after an advanced planning team was directly accosted and witnessed open drug use and other activities which caused them to fear for their safety.<sup>iv</sup> As a result, organizers chose not to host the convention in Seattle. The net loss: \$8.5 million in approximate expenditures to the local economy.

### **Local Businesses**

Business owners have expressed concern about the homelessness crisis long before COVID-19.<sup>v</sup> The pandemic, though, wreaked havoc on businesses in Denver, and as some recover, the combination of slower foot traffic downtown and increased homeless encampments have presented an untenable situation.

In October 21, for example, a downtown business closed doors, citing the pandemic and homelessness as factors. In regards to the effect the homeless crisis has on downtown Denver, the CEO stated: "I just don't think there's a whole lot of effort to control or protect the businesses down there."<sup>vi</sup> Another small business owner reported that their business was increasingly the focus of break ins and threats from unhoused individuals. The business owner expressed the desire for both a solution for homelessness and a way for her and her customers to feel safe.<sup>vii</sup>

### **Water**

In September 2021, a group of students from University of Denver and Regis University found that only a portion of the public restrooms in Denver are open and functional, and only 30 percent of water fountains and hand washing stations work.<sup>viii</sup> At the same time, about a quarter of people experiencing homelessness are living on the streets without consistent access to proper restroom facilities. Not only are these conditions unsanitary for people experiencing homelessness, they also impact waterways, particularly recreational water areas.

When there is a storm, the runoff carries contaminants from streets into the stormwater drainage system, which ultimately flow into rivers, lakes, and oceans. In Denver, the South Platte River is a popular attraction for recreation, and also where much of the urban stormwater runoff ends up. The contaminants found in stormwater runoff include various chemical pollutants as well as animal and human waste, the latter of which has been tied to higher levels of E.coli in our recreational water areas. According to researchers studying pathogens in urban stormwater systems, "urban sources of human waste include homeless encampments, RV discharges, and leaky or failing septic systems."<sup>ix</sup> Human waste can make its way into the rivers indirectly via stormwater runoff, or it can happen directly if there are

encampments near rivers. Non-human waste such as dog waste can also contribute to higher E.coli levels in rivers through stormwater runoff.

In March 2021, Colorado health officials “declared water quality in the South Platte River as it flows through Denver highly deficient, pointing to E.coli contamination at levels up to 137 times higher than a federal safety limit.”<sup>x</sup>

To reduce E.coli levels, researchers recommend several strategies related to homelessness: periodic cleanup of homeless camps near streams; provision of public restrooms; police enforcement; and support for housing and services to resolve homelessness.<sup>xi</sup> Additionally, researchers provide an example of a grant-funded program aimed at reducing the water quality impacts of homeless encampments in San José, CA. The program employed “homeless persons living in creek encampments to remove trash and litter and to engage in peer-to-peer outreach with others living in the encampment. Participants are housed temporarily and given food vouchers, case management services, employment skills, and assistance at transitioning to permanent housing (EPA 2011).”<sup>xii</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Homelessness is a crisis that has devastating effects on the over 6,000 individuals who experience it in the Metro Denver region. The crisis results in steep costs for taxpayers who are subsidizing higher spending on emergency room services, police interactions, expanding shelters and street cleanups. The homelessness crisis also touches many other areas of the economy and our society through its impacts on tourism, local businesses, and water quality, as just a few examples.

Building on this basic understanding of the economic footprint of those experiencing homelessness, Phase II of this research endeavor seeks to understand, and visualize, the ecosystem of factors that contribute to furthering homelessness as well as those factors that contribute to the prevention of homelessness or supporting those experiencing homelessness to move into stable housing. The systems map presented in the next section helps stakeholders understand and communicate how the ecosystem operates, what is working well and needs more or continued support, and where further opportunities for improvement remain.

# Systems Mapping

**Authors: Dr. Arianne Collopy, Kelsie Faulds, Dan Griner**

## Executive Summary

Homelessness is a visible outcome of a system that does not consistently work for everyone. This report is the result of efforts to understand the systemic factors that impact homelessness in the Metropolitan Denver area through a human-centered systems design lens. Human-centeredness means the data collection that informed the analysis in this report is based on conversations with individuals in the community who are in some way serving those currently experiencing homelessness and individuals who previously experienced homelessness. A systems design lens includes an emphasis on understanding how factors are connected and influence each other.

This report is intended for a general audience as a resource to better understand the interconnected system that is the ecosystem around homelessness.

In Section 2 of this report, we include our motivations and objectives in this work. Section 3 outlines our methodology for identifying community members to learn from, our conversations, and our approach to synthesizing a built understanding of the homelessness ecosystem through systems mapping. Section 4 introduces some of the larger context of our analysis. Section 5 presents the systems map through eight topic areas. Section 6 highlights some particularly impactful, unique, or innovative practices in the Metro Denver area that we find noteworthy for the change of perspective and the value that these practices bring to individuals experiencing homelessness and the providers that serve individuals experiencing homelessness. Recommendations that result from this analysis are prioritized in Section 7 along with exemplars in the community and showing how these goals are being met.

## Recommended Opportunity Areas

The recommendations from this work are framed as opportunity areas to invite impactful future innovation. “How might we” questions are commonly used to invite ideation and recognize that a one-size-fits-all solution is unlikely. Detailed context and some examples of current practices are used to illustrate each recommendation in Section 7.

1. **Housing Access and Affordability:** How might we improve pathways to affordable housing options that are equitably accessible for all residents in the Metro Denver area, regardless of what affordability looks like for each individual?
2. **Supporting People in Vulnerable Positions:** How might we support persistent engagement by providers, consistency of service or care across providers, and build trust in providers to be able to reach and help all people before that help is critical?

3. Staffing for High Quality and Consistent Care: How might we innovate staffing models and funding models of providers serving people experiencing homeless, to enhance the quality and consistency of services delivered by skilled professionals including long-term case management?
4. Trust in Services and System: How might we improve the clarity, consistency, and equity of eligibility requirements for services?
5. Coordination, Collaboration, and Partnerships: How might coordination and collaboration between providers and government agencies for those experiencing homelessness be enhanced, including data transparency, human-centered data collection methods, and marketing or outreach efforts to build awareness?
6. Technology and Information Access: How might access to critical online or electronic information be improved for those currently or at risk of experiencing homeless without reliable or consistent technology access?

## **Systems Mapping: Motivation and Objectives**

The ecosystem that impacts people experiencing homelessness is vast. It includes individuals, organizations, perceptions, social and societal factors, economic factors, technology, historical factors, and environmental factors. Building on a basic understanding of the economic footprint of those experiencing homelessness, this phase sought to understand, and visualize, the ecosystem of factors that contribute to furthering homelessness and that contribute to prevention of homelessness or supporting those experiencing homelessness to move past homelessness. The systems map that was created helps to understand and communicate how the ecosystem operates, what is working well and needs more or continued support, and where further opportunities remain.

## **Methodology & Terminology**

The systems map was created by synthesizing conversations with stakeholders in the Metro Denver area, including people and organizations that provide services and support for those experiencing homelessness, people currently experiencing or who have experienced homelessness, and organizations that coordinate resources, services, and efforts in this space.

## **Outreach and Stakeholder Conversations**

Conversations occurred in three phases. The first phase of outreach was to identify organizations to contact, which began by researching organizations in the Metro Denver area that fall into several categories of people and organizations:

- Public/Servant organizations, such as government agencies
- Job and work programs
- Substance abuse and mental health organizations
- Organizations providing food and resources
- Housing and shelter programs and services
- Hospitals and healthcare

- Advocacy groups
- Resource aggregators
- People currently or previously experiencing homelessness

Organizations that focus on support for specific populations such as families, youth, or veterans were noted. This initial research yielded 85 organizations. Organizations were prioritized for inclusion in this outreach list based on two criteria. The first criteria is organizations that span the range of types of services identified (reference the above list). The second criteria focused on seeking a broad and unique set of approaches.

Both large and small organizations were part of outreach. Both are important. Large organizations are likely to reach the most individuals, and have a high level, systemic perspective of factors that contribute to homelessness and reducing homelessness. Conversely, smaller organizations typically have a narrower scope and may reach fewer individuals, but correspondingly can share deeper insights into challenges and opportunities of individuals experiencing homelessness. Thus, this outreach was designed to build the most comprehensive view of the ecosystem around homelessness as possible from both individual, localized factors and systemic factors that influence many people and organizations.

Seventy-two organizations were contacted in the second phase of our outreach. Organizations were contacted and invited to schedule a conversation. Outreach was conducted by phone, email, and by in-person visits to ensure that, for example, organizations with minimal staff to return phone calls could still opt in or out through a short in-person visit. In total, conversations were held with 30 unique organizations. The organizations that participated in conversations span each of the initial categories identified (see Figure 1), and across six of the seven counties in the Metro Denver area (see Figure 2).

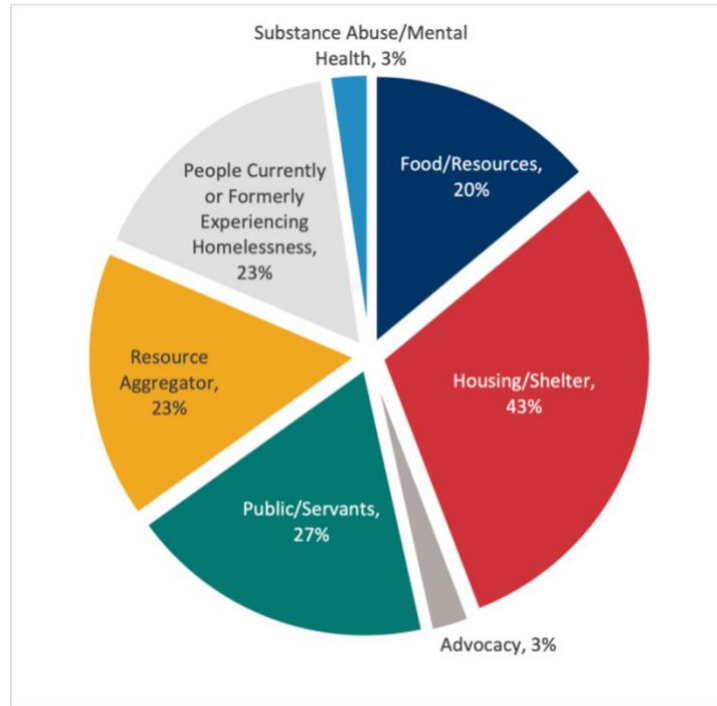


Figure 1: Distribution of types of organizations contacted. Total does not sum to 100% because some organizations or individuals fit multiple categories.

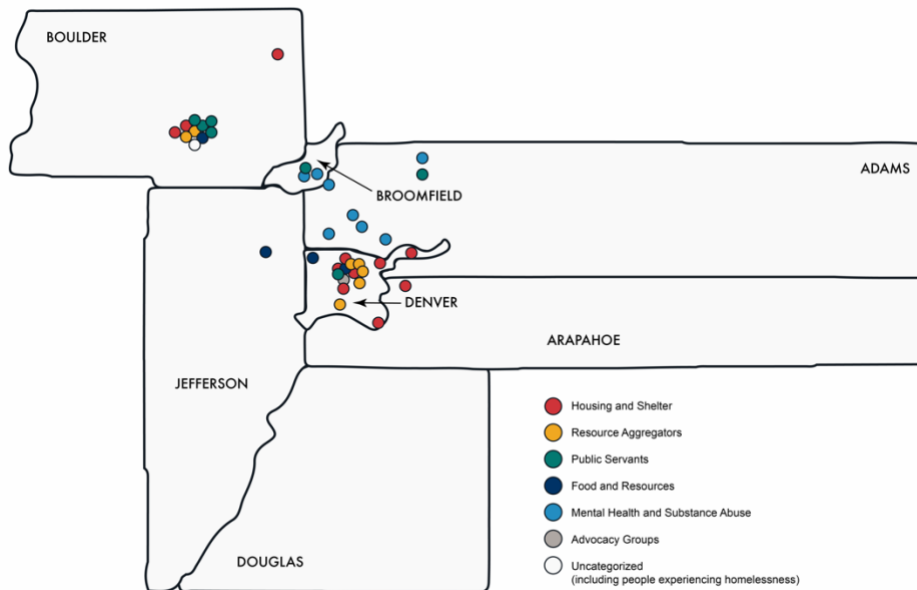
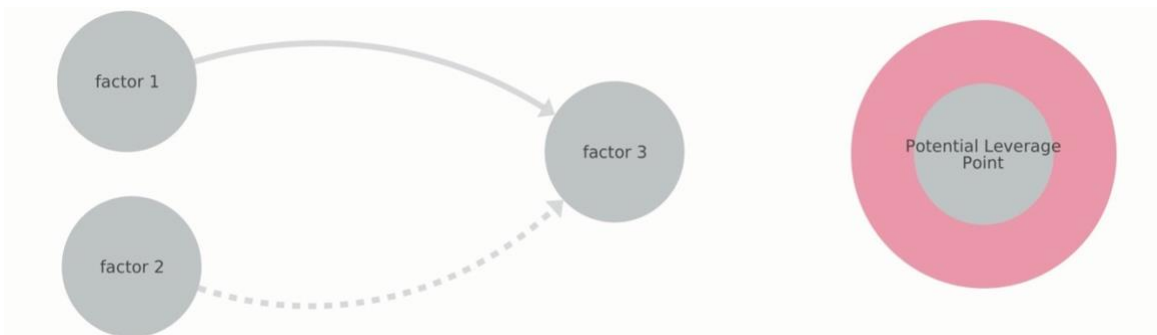


Figure 2: Map of stakeholder outreach. Note that there are more locations than conversations because organizations with multiple locations are shown as in all locations.

Each conversation followed a general discussion guide which prompted each organization’s representatives to share their mission, resources available to that organization or resources needed to be more effective, perceptions or reactions to their work, positive experiences and outcomes observed, and opportunities they see from the point of view of their organization and the people they serve. Questions were tailored to elicit stories and uncover the perspectives and insights of each representative, particularly regarding their understanding of why existing circumstances exist or why desired factors do not yet exist. Where possible, we used references provided in each conversation to reach out to additional community members or organizations.

## Systems Mapping

The aggregate of all conversations with organizations and individuals informed the development of a systems map, or influence diagram, which visually illustrates the connection between factors. Factors are observable states of the world, typically that can be quantified in some way. (While factors can be thought of as quantities, there are not necessarily known quantities for each factor.) Examples of factors are the number of case managers or staff working at a given point in time (people or organizations), the degree of trust in service providers (a belief or perception), and the current availability of housing (a resource quantity). Connections between factors can be positive (reinforcing influences) or negative (diminishing influences). A positive or reinforcing influence can be understood as “more of Factor A yields more of factor B”. This is denoted as a solid arrow. A negative or diminishing influence can be understood as “more of Factor A yields less of factor C”. This is denoted as a dashed arrow. A caveat is that an influence map may not be able to show every causal step between two factors.



The primary value of systems mapping is as a tool to make sense of a large space that is seen and experienced differently by many people. A systems map can identify factors that are connected and form reinforcing or diminishing cycles, only visible when the factors are considered together. A systems map can also identify individual factors that are influential, such as factors that are connected to many different parts of the system, often vulnerable points. Factors that support or detract from vulnerable factors are key to identifying opportunities for focused impact or leverage. The goals of understanding, visualizing, and identifying

potential areas for focused impact in the homelessness ecosystem are therefore all supported by the creation of a systems map.

The systems map can inform a quantitative data display to augment understanding of the numbers of people experiencing homelessness and the systemic, contextual factors that shape their experience.

## **Validation and Limitations**

As a tool to make sense of the ecosystem around homelessness, validation is a process of ensuring that the systems map is an accurate reflection of actual experiences and processes. The primary approach to validation taken was follow-up conversations with representatives in this space. Validation conversations focus on ensuring the systems map illustrates, and is representative, of their experiences in this space.

Limitations of the approach to create the systems map, and the systems map itself, are centered in the time constraint of the outreach done, and that only some community members were available in the time available. The diversity of organizations purposefully contacted aims to reduce, but cannot negate, this limitation. The systems map represents the diversity of the community members and representatives that were contacted, and is expected to reflect the broader community.

A necessary limitation of the process to create the systems map is the presence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic, stretching from early 2020 and continuing through 2021 has disrupted many ways of living and working, and the homelessness ecosystem is no different. A primary impact of the pandemic as relates to this work was the difficulty of communicating with people experiencing homelessness, and providers for those experiencing homelessness as their resources are stretched thin. This is a contextual factor that may limit the applicability of certain areas of the systems map to different points in time. However, the systems map is expected to be accurate for the current time point and can inform immediate steps to the future.

## **Context of Homelessness Ecosystem**

The broad context surrounding the homelessness ecosystem in Denver includes factors related to finances, politics, and the Metro Denver community. The COVID-19 pandemic has been an added layer of complexity. In addition, there are existing organizational structures based in the Continuum of Care network supported by the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) that are integral to the ecosystem. We share some of this broad context in recognition that our understanding of this system exists in today's context, and future opportunities are also contextualized by where we are today.



## *Financial Context*

The financial approaches to addressing the homeless ecosystem are varied – largely because financial data in this space is not easily understood, and the numbers can include money spent for a wide variety of resources to enable different approaches. The amount of money spent in this area and the many approaches at play all speak to the complexity and difficulty of making lasting change in this space. Funding is often tied to certain outcomes or approaches based on the granting agency, making it difficult to apply funds easily to where they are most needed at any point in time. While this is an important area of focus, it was not within the scope of the System Mapping or a subject explicitly explored in our qualitative interviews. For the Economic Footprint of Homelessness report please refer to Phase 1 of this project for more info.

Classifications or typing of homelessness also impacts the financial context of the homelessness ecosystem as these classifications are often applied to service or program eligibility or prioritization guidelines. Classifications of homelessness from HUD are:

- Literally homelessness
- At imminent risk of homelessness
- Homelessness under other Federal statutes
- Fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence

Separate criteria of chronically homeless or groups such as families, youth, veterans, and elders are also used. However not all situations may be covered by the definitions written into legal code, and individuals may not be able to readily provide information to assure they fit in a given category. The guidelines for a Continuum of Care include what kinds of programs and services would be covered under a grant application, as well as restrictions and guidelines on activities such as mandatory reporting and adherence to equal opportunity protections. There is flexibility in what programs and services a Continuum of Care can provide and restrictions to only certain groups of people experiencing homelessness are possible. These choices can create additional hurdles or limits to accessing services for people who do not fit a specific classification.

Separately from the Continuum of Care, many organizations working in this space are non-profits and are in part supported by financial donations from within the community. This presents a disjointed financial picture with potentially conflicting incentives for organizations working in the same space.

## *Political Context*

Denver and Colorado have distributed decision-making power, ranging from the community, mayoral, City, County, Metropolitan area, and the state. At the city, county and state level there are different approaches to the issues of homelessness and with a change in leadership, the previous administration's plan can be

sidelined. This changing landscape complicates how groups are able to meet the needs of those experiencing homelessness and what resources they can expect to achieve their goals. While Denver has over 80 staff dedicated to housing stability, some counties have extremely limited or no staff dedicated to the issues of homelessness and as numbers of unhoused begin to rise, they struggle to meet the needs of that community.

Homelessness features prominently in the current multi-year plans for communities across Denver. In many cities and communities whose population of individuals experiencing homeless has grown, there is a new focus and effort to engage more directly to support this population.

With the overall increase of individuals experiencing homelessness and at risk of experiencing homelessness, the most troublesome of issues within this ecosystem become more noticeable. With encampments encroaching on neighborhoods or businesses, policies quickly spring up and divert attention from the long-term solutions in favor of short-term fixes that take off some of the immediate pressure. While there is a desperate need for short-term solutions for those who are experiencing homelessness, a long-term focus helps anchor short-term solutions in a common vision of the future. Without a long-term focus that vision is hazy.

The general public is not often given a systems level understanding to help see the consequences of policies and the many types of people in danger of or currently experiencing homelessness, which can manifest as misinformed decisions by individuals or elected officials. Focus is often put on symptoms and resulting issues instead of root causes and prevention measures.

Regardless of political affiliation, homelessness affects us all and it will require a united effort to begin preventing and eradicating the problem of homelessness (not the people) from our communities.

### *Metro Denver Community*

- Denver County's population has grown by 21% over the last 10 years and grew by 1.6% in 2019 alone. This is a higher rate than the state of Colorado overall, which has a 15% growth 2010-2019.
- We have a housing deficit of over 175,000 homes in Colorado as of 2019.
- While being a fairly progressive state in implementing new initiatives, Colorado's housing shortage puts us as fourth worst in the nation behind Washington D.C, Oregon, and California.

While unity across the entire Denver Metro area is challenging because of the size of the metropolitan area and the variance among communities, there are lessons to be learned through the implementation and evaluation of varied approaches and pilot programs. Evaluation of approaches and programs at a systemic level can particularly enhance understanding of how those approaches and programs may be

implemented at a larger scale. Unique approaches and strengths in certain areas exist, and if promising pilot programs prove effective in that context, may be well suited for adoption across multiple communities with similar strengths.

### *COVID-19 Pandemic Context*

Since the inception of the pandemic, the way we have approached shelters and access to services has been completely disrupted. Shelter's safe occupancy rates have been cut drastically and what was once a refuge becomes a liability for infection. Service providers who were heavily staffed with volunteers found them losing their ability to meet needs without their workforce. Unprecedented numbers of people losing their employment and thereby their homes, has displaced a record number of people in our communities. With limited shelter options and little available housing, compromises have been made on how long and where the unsheltered can set up temporary residences. Undoubtedly, the pandemic has shown the fragility of our systems and has put a record number of people in our community in a vulnerable state.

### *Continuum of Care Context*

The homelessness ecosystem currently is very fractured and lacks a consistent vision and strategies that will yield a holistic solution. This fracturing exists at the city and county level and each one of these regions has their own levels of tolerance or acceptability for the approaches. Some cities instituted camping bans, while others have left them unenforced, or considered repealing them. Some require residency for access to services. Some communities have even avoided admitting a need to address the issues of their residents who are experiencing homelessness. The case study examples have demonstrated the need for a cohesive and concerted effort with government, service providers and the public all aligned on the goals. Continuums of Care (a federal designation used nationally) help to garner funding and spread it out over a variety of needed service providers and spread over multiple localities. Currently some progress is being made in coordinating HMIS (Homeless Management Information System) data across the multiple continuums and across the communities they service, but this is a recent effort and will need wide-spread adoption to reach its full potential.

### **Systems Map**

The overall systems map includes over 100 factors, and can be divided into eight thematic topics. The full map is shown in Figure 3. Each topic area is centered around an outcome that is either existing, and positive, or viewed as likely to be positive. Most outcome factors have precursor factors that are positively reinforcing and negatively reinforcing. Each topic area is intended to illustrate both angles and illustrate opportunities for supporting positive outcomes and reducing factors that diminish positive outcomes.

Feedback cycles in the systems map are a series of factors that each positively support the following factor, visually forming a loop. Connections between factors

may be conditional, indicated with a label on the arrow. Other cases may have a time delay, indicated by two lines across an arrow, meaning that more of a factor over time builds up to a resulting effect, or there is a delay before an effect is realized.

The thematic topics that emerge from the systems map are:

- **Housing Accessibility** as an equity driver for homelessness
- **Housing Affordability** as an economic driver for homelessness
- **Vulnerability** as a state considered a precursor for homelessness, that can arise from many situations
- **Trust** in services and the system overall as a key to utilization of services
- **Collaboration and Partnerships** among providers to be able to best deliver services
- **Technology Access** and expectations as a barrier to accessing services
- **Staffing** as a key resource that enables high-quality services
- **Outcomes** that are desired goals and outcomes for those experiencing homelessness

Each topic area is explored in the following pages with a localized portion of the systems map. A description of the systems map is supported by vignettes and stories from community members, service providers, and organization representatives.

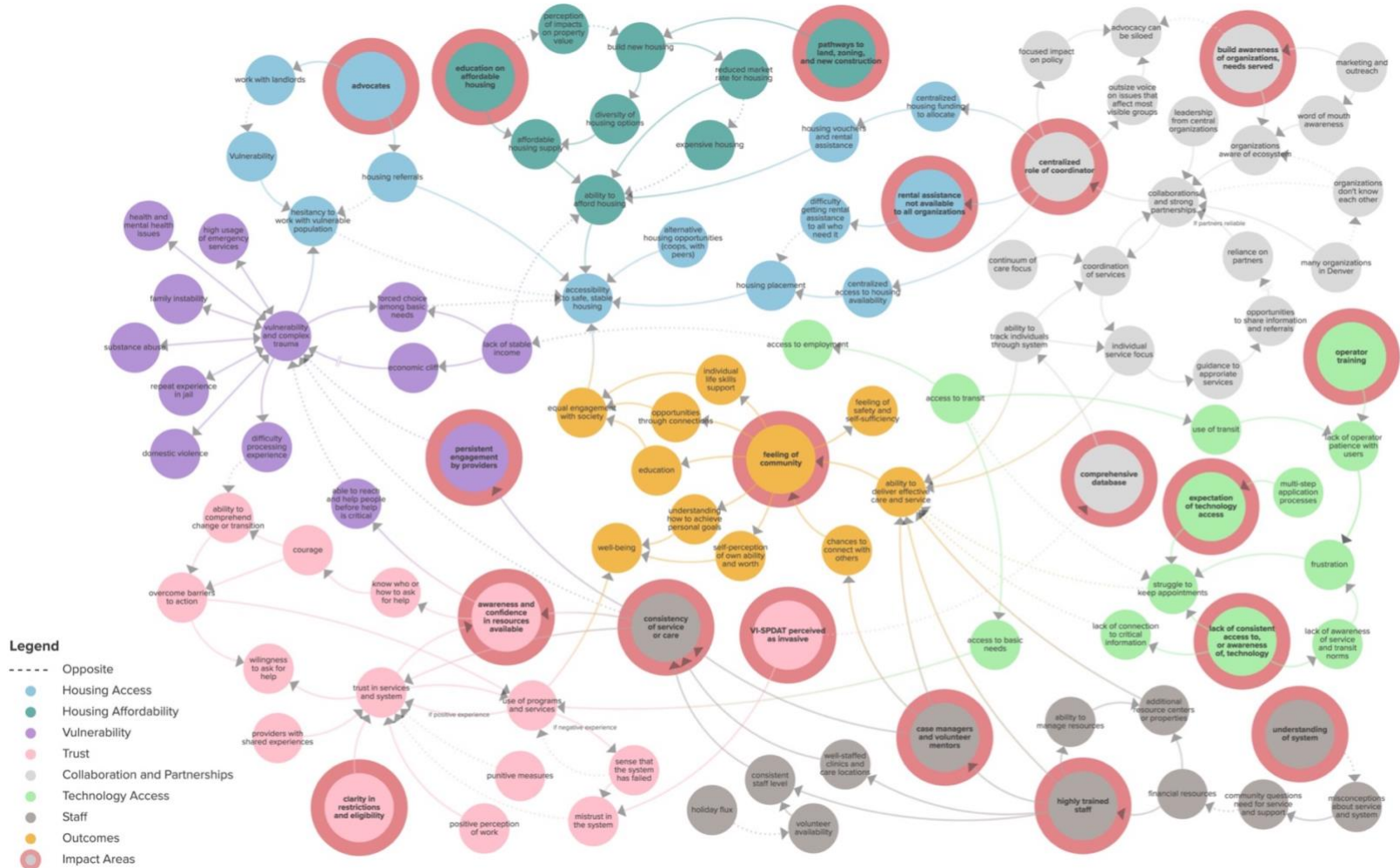


Figure 3: Overall systems map of Homelessness Ecosystem. Solid lines indicate that more of one factor leads to more of the connected factor. A dashed line is the opposite effect, where more of one factor leads to less of the connected factor. This map can also be seen online at <https://kumu.io/axc/homelessness-ecosystem>.

## Housing Accessibility

Housing accessibility refers to the ability to secure safe and stable housing, including considerations beyond financial affordability. The factors that are related to housing accessibility are shown in Figure 4.

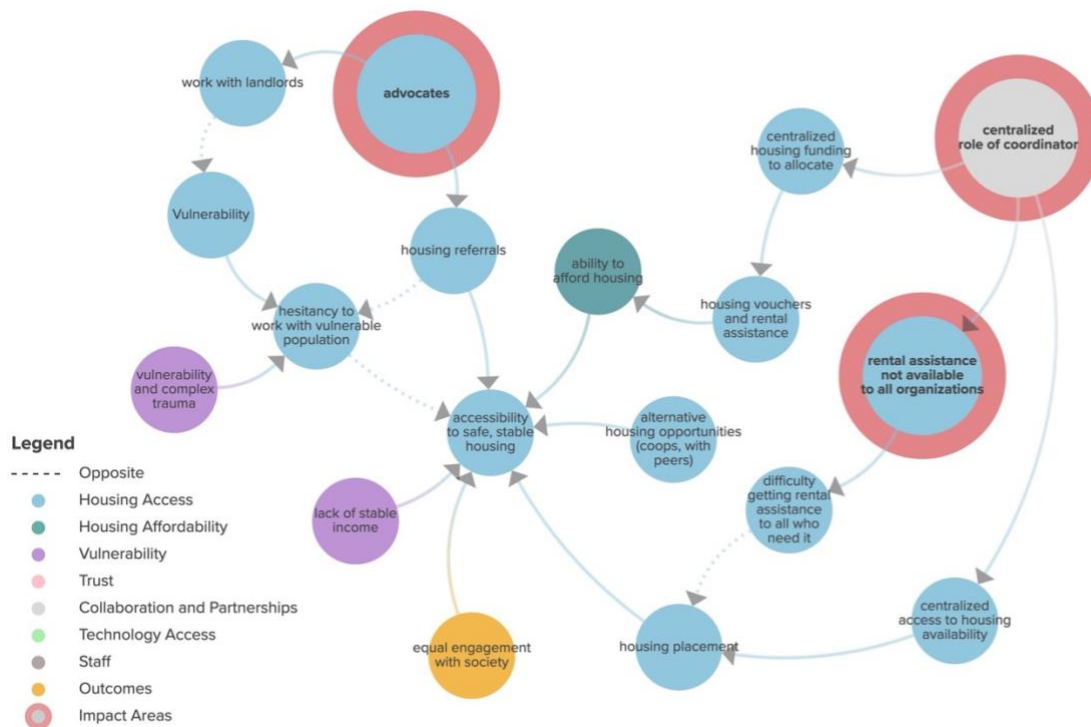


Figure 4: Systems map segment centered around accessibility to safe, stable housing.

A focused coordinator within a network of service and housing providers is valuable to centralize the availability of housing options as well as financial support such as housing vouchers or rental assistance for housing. This streamlines the process for housing placement for individuals and families. However, a caveat that may arise from an incompletely integrated provider network is that rental assistance is not available or visible to all organizations to distribute. Increased ability for organizations to offer rental assistance can reduce the difficulty of getting rental assistance to all who need it rapidly. This may alleviate delays that can occur in the process to secure a housing voucher or credit, as well as access to a location where that payment can be used.

Housing advocates can play another critical role in the path to housing accessibility. Many individuals experiencing or having previously experienced homelessness are considered vulnerable, and the perception of vulnerability is considered a risk factor by many landlords or rental agencies. The VI-SPDAT (Vulnerability Index – Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool) is in use in Colorado and is a measurement tool to identify appropriate housing options for people based on their circumstances

and needs. While the information collected from a VI-SPDAT assessment cannot be used explicitly to deny housing, just the perception of vulnerability can make landlords hesitant to work with individuals seeking housing. Further, the VI-SPDAT may not be consistently reliable in its assessment or as a predictor of housing outcomes. Housing advocates can help bridge this gap by facilitating interactions with landlords or providing housing referrals, provided that the advocates are perceived as genuine by those seeking housing.

### *Vignettes*

VI-SPDAT is a widely used tool to assess risk in a housing option, but it is seen as invasive and not culturally inclusive. An extra barrier is the repeated interactions that can be required to fill out paperwork when specific documentation like birth certificates or social security cards are needed. Additional challenges exist for those leaving a homeless state in securing housing. Many landlords and housing management companies have questions and requirements around previous residences, previous evictions, job and income requirements, and former justice involvement. Finding available housing in a market that is already in short supply is difficult, and with perceived or real risks associated with your application it can be overly prohibitive to finding housing.

### *Summary*

Opportunities to address the accessibility of housing options include expanding the number of organizations able to provide financial assistance for housing options, as well as supporting the work of trusted advocates to provide housing referrals and work with landlords to reduce negative assumptions about individuals considered vulnerable. Both opportunity areas are pathways to enhance the delivery of individualized solutions for people experiencing homelessness. There is a strong need to support pathways to housing for people in vulnerable situations, and support for those individuals in general, as described in Section 5c, also supports the opportunities for increasing housing accessibility.

### **Housing Affordability**

One of the most direct factors influencing homelessness is the availability of housing at an appropriate price point for consumers. A lack of housing in Denver, as mentioned in Section 4 of this report, is attributed to strong market demand across all income brackets, and a rate of new housing built that is lower than population growth in the Metro Denver area.

Figure 5 shows factors related to the ability to afford housing, including all types of housing (single family homes, apartments, multi-family housing, and affordable housing) options.

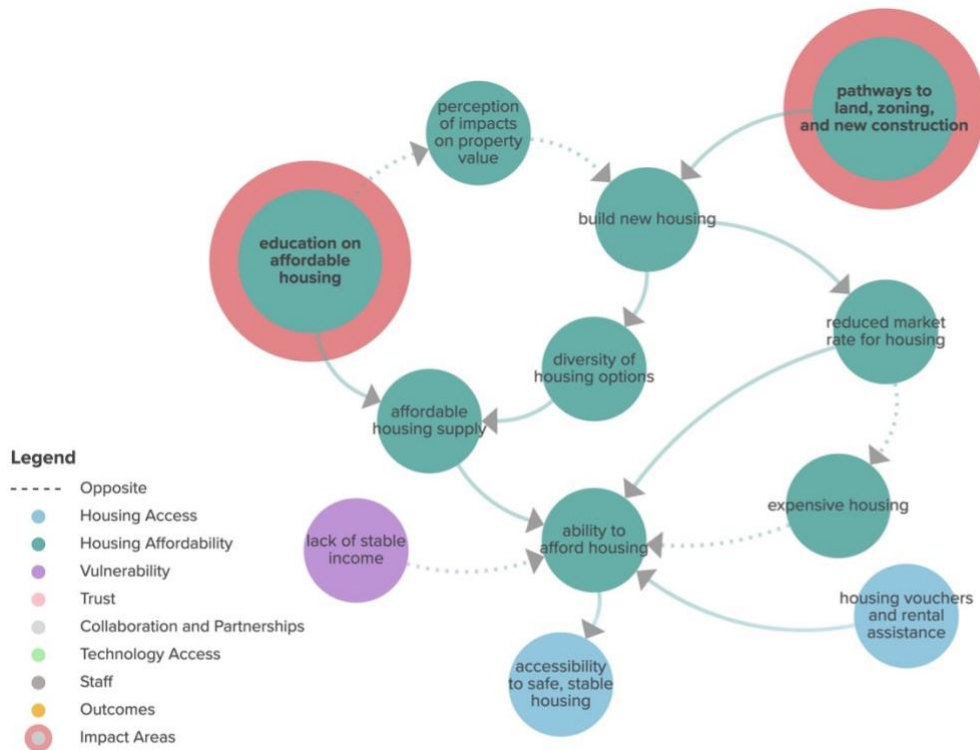


Figure 5: Systems map segment centered on the ability to afford housing.

Perceptions of affordable housing are a key negative impact on the development of affordable housing options, compounded by negative perceptions of growth overall that impact all kinds of housing development. Building new housing options of any kind is expected to both increase the diversity of housing options, as well as reduce the market rate for housing provided the supply of housing moves closer to the demand for housing. Alternative housing options such as peer matching programs or cooperative housing models are a different pathway to increase affordability of housing by using existing housing stock in different ways.

People can end up in a situation where housing is unaffordable for many reasons. Job loss or infrequent work opportunities leading to a lack of stable income, is one factor that can create or exacerbate an economic cliff. Job loss was often expressed as a factor leading to unaffordability of housing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Other people must simply make a difficult choice between paying for housing or paying for other basic needs for themselves or their families.

### Vignettes

Housing affordability is a problem that spans all of the Metro Denver community and those in danger of becoming houseless and those who are currently experiencing homelessness are affected more adversely. One nationwide affordable housing real estate developer shared that because of the zoning challenges and community pushback they have not been able to move any new projects in



Colorado forward in 7 years. Denver's Department of Housing Stability (HOST) shared that to develop a new single unit for affordable housing it costs upwards of \$300,000 in the Metro Denver Area. With rising rental costs and a shortage of supply, many vouchers are unable to meet the gap between current prices and what people can afford. Some groups who assist with housing placement describe situations where a voucher will expire before it is able to be used because of lack of affordable options or companies willing to take them. Many developers have difficulty realizing multi-unit housing and communities adopt a "Not in my backyard" (NIMBY) stance, effectively blocking population density. Greater population density would potentially allow people to live in the communities where they work and prevent the need for increasing transportation and spending more of their income to maintain employment. One example of the results of this affordability issue is from Adams County, where the majority of those experiencing homelessness in their community are employed and living in their vehicles, in parks, and parking lots.

### *Summary*

Additional pathways to building new housing or zoning allowances may allow additional new housing to be built in the Metro Denver area's growing market. Opportunities also include education around the purpose of affordable housing and the types of people who benefit from affordable housing options, to reduce misconceptions that may exist.

### **Vulnerability**

Vulnerability is a state of being susceptible to physical or emotional harm. Many situations can lead to an individual becoming more vulnerable, several common factors are shown in Figure 6: high usage of emergency services, health and mental health issues or crises, family instability, substance abuse, repeat experience in jail, and domestic violence are just some of the situations that can lead to or worsen vulnerability. Globally, these individual and social factors along with environmental factors like pollution or pests are recognized as factors that contribute to vulnerability and can result in a loss of housing. Critically, there are many pathways to become more vulnerable, and those pathways compound to produce complex trauma. Individuals with complex trauma or high levels of vulnerability are more likely to end up in a dangerous situation, meaning a higher need for immediate shelter.

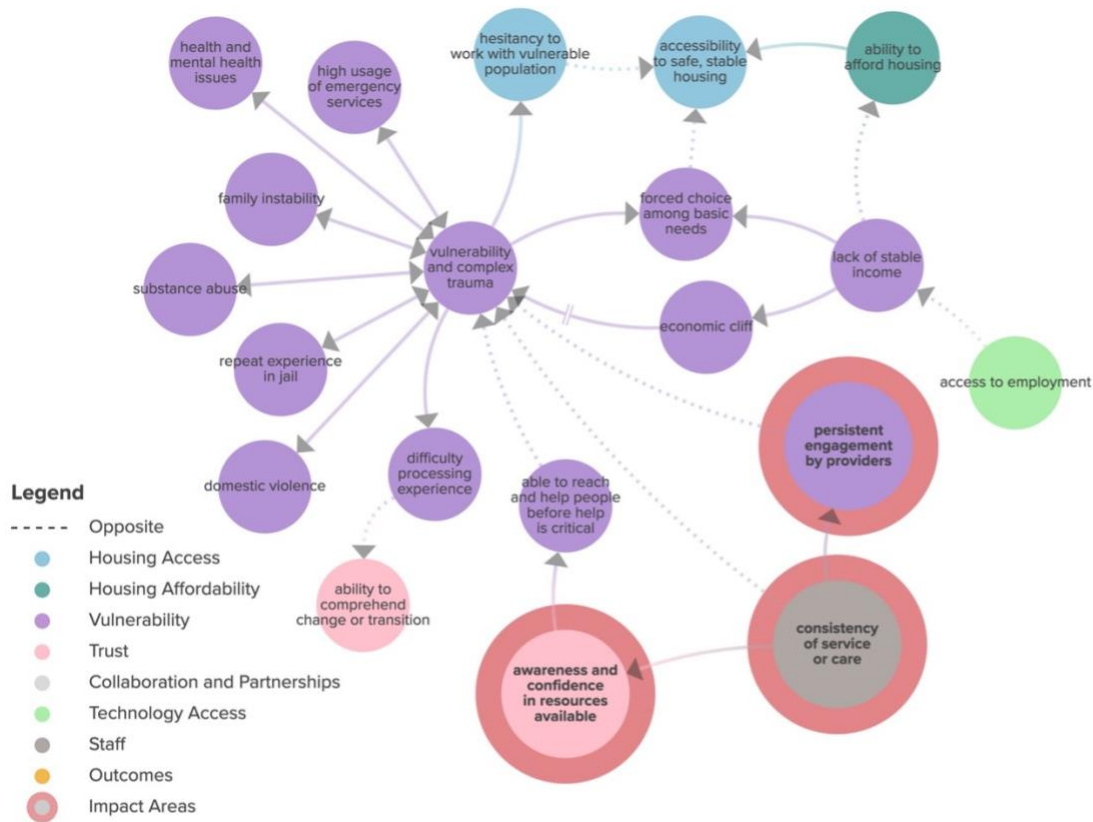


Figure 6: Systems map segment centered around vulnerable population and people with complex trauma.

Higher vulnerability means lower accessibility of stable, safe housing – a profound block in the pathway to housing and ending homelessness. Individuals in a highly vulnerable state or with complex trauma may not fully understand their situation, or may feel they are forced to choose which barriers they face to address with the money they have.

There are few current pathways out of a vulnerable state, which rely on persistent engagement by service providers and consistency of care provided, as well as enhancing the availability and accessibility of information so that individuals who may be experiencing homelessness or grappling with a situation where they may lose stable housing can build confidence in resources available, and build courage to comprehend a change or transition from their current situation.

### Vignettes

There are an exponential number of ways for a person to find themselves in a vulnerable state and at risk of being houseless. Not only are there many factors that may lead to homelessness, but multiple factors can also compound to reinforce an increasingly vulnerable position. One reference that was offered is “that the only consistent predictor of those who may become homeless, is that they have been

homeless previously.” Social determinants of health may leave families in generational poverty and leave them more susceptible to being in a vulnerable state. Low income, or lack of financial education may leave individuals with little to no safety net for retirement. Domestic violence or abuse may leave partners and children with difficult choices between abuse with financial stability or homelessness.

### Summary

Key opportunities in this area are to reinforce the consistent and persistent support for individuals in vulnerable situations so that they can be reached, supported, and helped before that help is critical.

### Trust in Services and the System

Trust in providers is a key driver of use of programs, services, and housing. Trust comes from varied sources, including a positive perception of the provider’s work in the community, reliable service or care, providers having shared experiences such as having previously experienced homelessness, and clarity in restrictions or eligibility requirements for care. Punitive measures such as warrant checks decreases trust in services or providers. The factors that impact trust and the multiple pathways that trust enhances use of programs and services are shown in Figure 7.

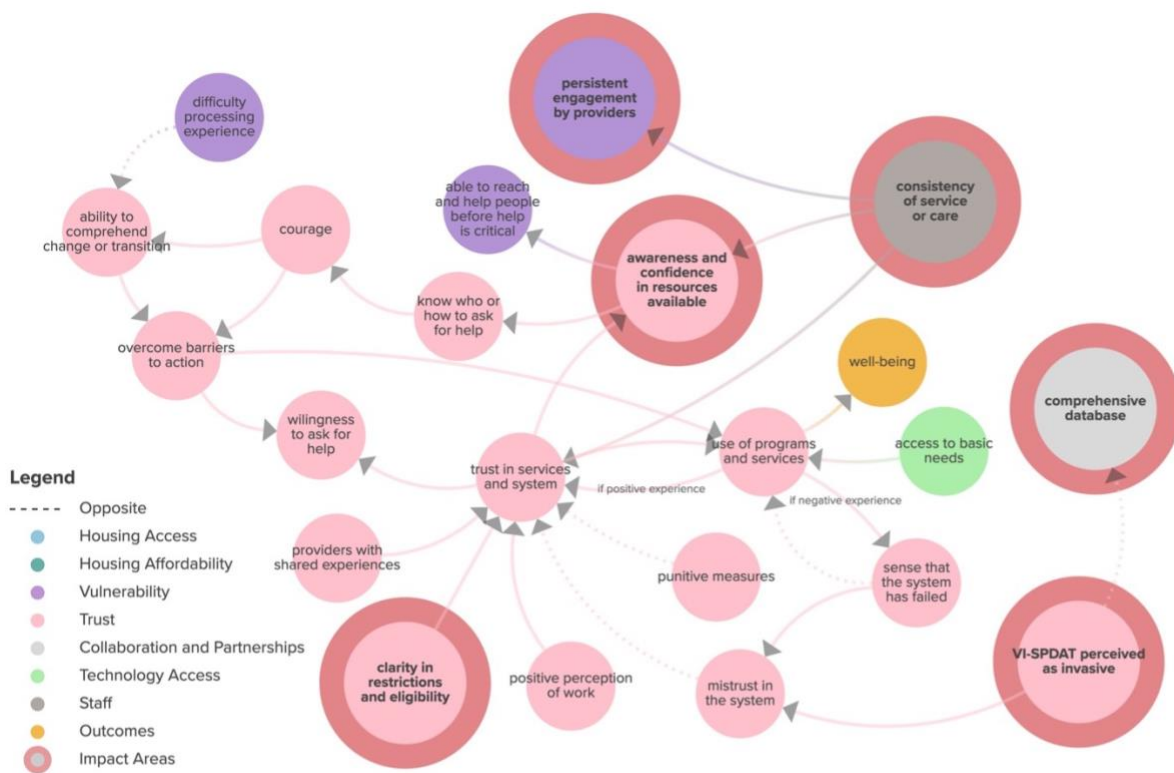


Figure 7: Systems map segment centered on trust in providers and services, and the use of programs and services.

Increased trust in providers yields increased awareness and confidence in resources available, meaning people know who or how to ask for help when they need it. The knowledge of how, and who to ask, for any kind of help builds courage, which can help to overcome barriers to action that may exist. These barriers take the form of unwillingness to ask for help, frustration with the system – referring to care, legal or justice, housing, or even broadly reflecting frustration with society. The courage and willingness to ask for help is a primary mode for use of services.

First impressions from providers of all kinds of services or housing programs are critically important as even a single negative experience can create a feeling that the system has failed an individual. More of this negative impression decreases the usage of programs and services, such as housing programs or shelters. Additional avenues to explore are the indirect costs (fiscal, environmental, and social) that is incurred by these negative impressions and avoidance of services.

A factor that has strong leverage in this cycle of trust is the clarity in eligibility requirements. Eligibility varies by provider, and different restrictions apply to people in different situations. Some eligibility restrictions or requirements are set by funding sources, some may be legally mandated, and others may be set by individual providers.

Clarifying and streamlining restrictions and eligibility requirements for people seeking information is a key opportunity. This extends to the general public as well, as transparency and streamlining requirements for services helps everyone to better understand how the system works and what gaps exist.

### *Vignettes*

One individual who formerly experienced homelessness shared that within that community there is a distrust of the system and many are fearful of engaging with providers. The individual now runs a nonprofit organization and provides services without any restrictions or conditions. They also have vetted service providers join their events along with others who formerly experienced homelessness to provide support and show a pathway out of that situation. Many individuals experiencing homelessness have had experiences with programs or housing that were unsuccessful in previous attempts and overcoming the fear of trying again can also manifest as a distrust in the systems or approaches. A transition into unfamiliar housing can be daunting. However, repeated interactions and built trust can yield nearly 100% uptake of housing services, such as was seen through the Social Impact Bond program in Denver. Only a few accepted the offer of support housing on first contact and many individuals needed to be convinced of the program before accepting. Trust needed to be built over 3 or 4 repeated entreaties by SIB staff.

## *Summary*

Key opportunities to enhance trust in providers, and to positively influence the usage of programs and services therefore are enhancing clarity in restrictions and eligibility requirements for services, as well as enhancing the awareness and confidence in resources available for those experiencing homelessness.

## **Collaboration and Partnerships**

Collaboration and partnerships between organizations enable individually tailored services and increase organizations' ability to guide people to appropriate services and ability to share resources efficiently. The segment of the systems map shown in Figure 8 shows some of the factors related to effective collaboration and partnerships between organizations. At a basic level, many organizations simply cannot exist without partners. Strong partnerships are only possible if organizations are aware of each other, and at a systems level strong leadership is needed to ensure coordinated vision and strategies for action. Enhancing marketing and outreach efforts is an apparent opportunity for increasing awareness of the organizational ecosystem, as marketing and outreach efforts often fall outside critical staff tasks of delivering services, as is developing and recognizing a centralized coordinator role in this space.

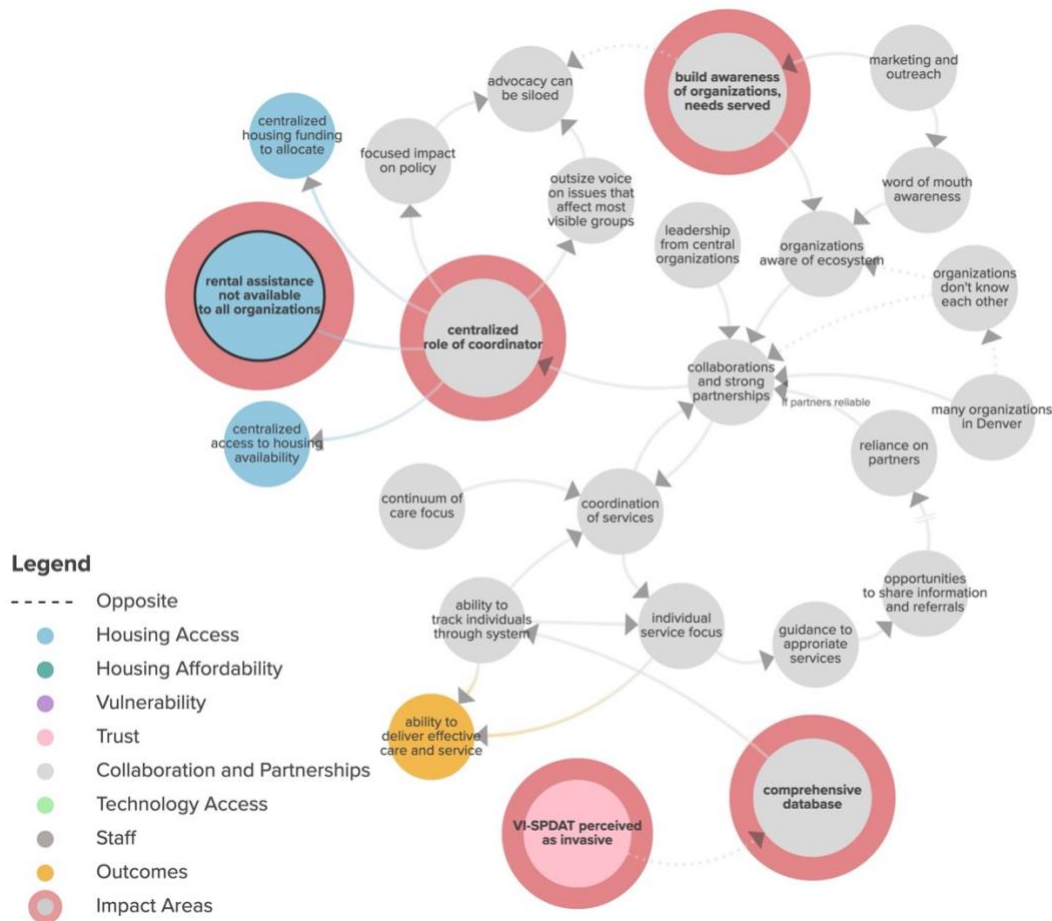


Figure 8: Systems map segment centered on collaborations and strong partnerships to support ecosystem.

Organizations working together in a collaborative nature allows individual organizations to specialize, which can build a reliance on other organizations to play their role in a partnership. This kind of specialization also allows for a focused role of a coordinator, which may be situated in a local government. These coordinators do not necessarily directly deliver services, but can play a role in centralizing information and resources, allocating those resources, and advocacy for the individuals served by the services coordinated. A possible blind spot is that a strong central coordinator necessarily also means that resources like centrally distributed rental assistance are not available to multiple organizations to distribute, possibly presenting as a bottleneck. An enabler of the ability to coordinate services is a view of aggregate data, aiding understanding of who is providing services, who is utilizing services, and where gaps may exist in coverage or service utilization. Data collection is fraught with disparate data collection tools and perceptions of the data collection process based on short, but impactful touchpoints with individuals experiencing homelessness.

## *Vignettes*

In many ways coordination and collaboration is essential for the success of organizations. One organization provides temporary housing, but needs to send their clients to other organizations for mental health services and drug treatment programs. The Homelessness Leadership Council was highlighted as a good example and allowed many organizations to have visibility to what others were doing and provided a coordinated focus to the issues that arose throughout the pandemic. Collaboration with public institutions like schools can help identify youth who may be experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness. Another area where coordination and collaboration is valuable is in the successful housing of all individuals, especially those chronically unhoused, by matching housing programs with supportive services that meet each individual's needs. There are still opportunities to coordinate resources: needs vary from individual to individual, and a robust system to connect resources can enhance each organization's ability to serve their current clients.

Coordinated systems that help give clear and concise information on individuals experiencing homelessness also help with providing services quickly and efficiently. A Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) is a consistent touchpoint in this area and efforts like Built for Zero provide a framework for the data that makes enhanced coordination across the city, county, and state possible. When used well they can help reduce individual staffing needs at each point in the continuum and also track progress and reduce interruptions in care.

## *Summary*

Different organizations have a different view of their ecosystem of providers, data availability, resources, and priorities. Key opportunities in this space are to enhance organizations' awareness and visibility of each other, perhaps via marketing or outreach efforts, support centralized coordination to ensure awareness across providers in the ecosystem, and centralized information availability to enhance organizations' ability to understand the needs in the space they work and serve.

## **Technology Access and Expectations**

For people who are experiencing homelessness, expectations of access to technology along with inconsistent access to technology impacts access to care and public services. This can include access to important paperwork required for housing applications, medical appointments, ability to pay bills on time, and transit services. Factors related to technology that can impact the ability to deliver care and service tailored to an individual's lived experiences are shown in Figure 9.

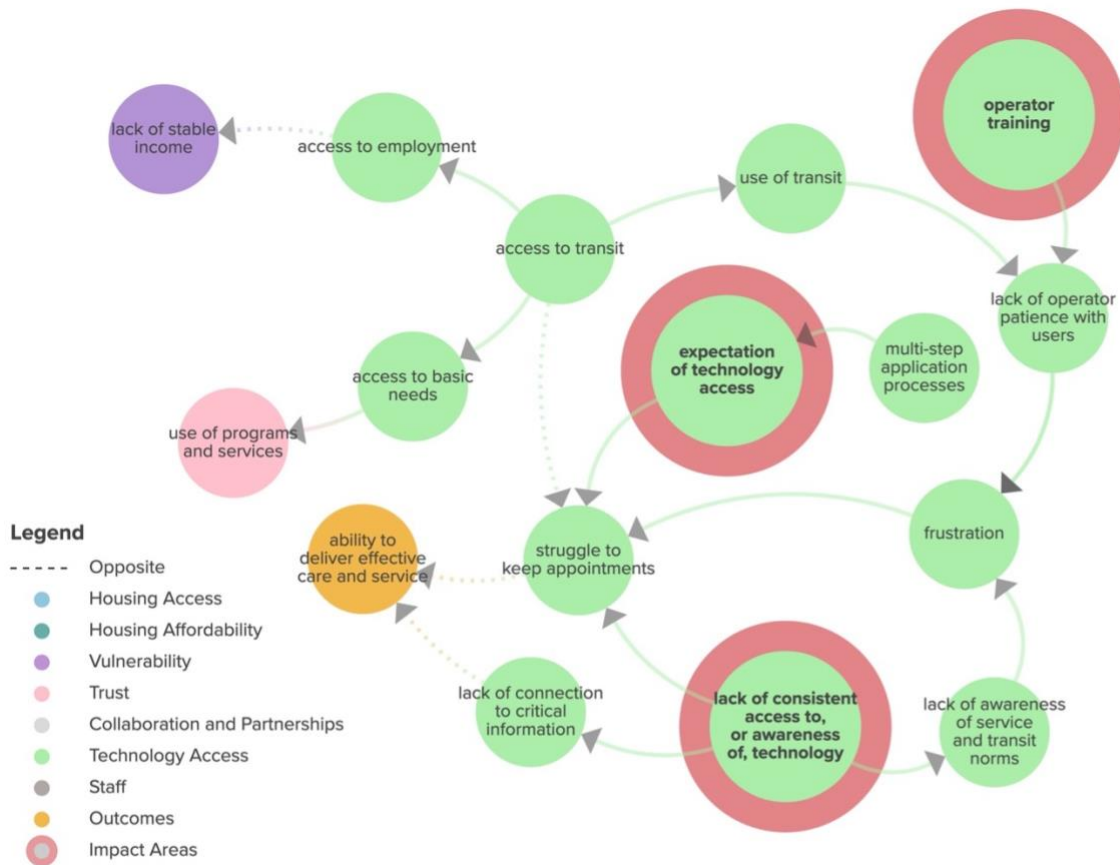


Figure 9: Systems map segment focused on technology considerations centered around the ability to deliver care and service tailored to lived experiences.

A lack of consistent access to technology for those experiencing homelessness can manifest as infrequent access to wireless internet, access to electricity for charging devices, or a lack of regular access to a device for communication or for internet access. This lack of technology access leads to a lack of connection to critical information, which may be related to health, work, housing, legal issues, caring for one’s finances, or any other need.

For providers, this inability to regularly or reliably engage with the community they serve directly impacts ability to deliver service or care in a way that makes sense for every individual. Tailored to an individual’s lived experience means that each person seeking service or care may receive different services, which may mean a sequence of appointments, a set of different providers, or a single appointment. A compounding factor is an expectation of technology access, built into multi-step processes for healthcare, services, application processing, or phone calls where a participant on either side is not readily reachable.

Access to transit is a key part of access to needed services and employment opportunities, which can be hampered by a lack of awareness of services and transit norms. A lack of operator patience with users results in frustration for all



parties, and frustration with experiences can increase an inability to keep appointments, further setting back providers' ability to deliver care, meet basic needs, or find stable employment. Operator training may be one opportunity to disrupt this negative cycle.

### *Vignettes*

Technological challenges exist at many levels and for all parties. Through our interviews we have learned that individuals experiencing homelessness lack consistent access to technology that they control which makes transit, healthcare, legal issues, meeting deadlines, keeping appointments, and paying bills extremely difficult. Tracking and staying connected with clients is a similar challenge for providers and prevents consistent care. Many types of programs require regular check-ins and timely responses to applications to be successful.

### *Summary*

Key opportunities in this space are around recontextualizing the expectation of technology access for all users of services, increasing the ways to consistently access technology resources or build awareness of services or norms around services, and training for public service operators to work positively with patrons who may not be aware of norms.

### **Staffing for High Quality and Consistent Care**

Staff availability is a primary concern for many of the organizations contacted as part of this analysis. Two goals of providers are the ability to maintain a consistent staffing level and deliver reliable service or care. The availability of highly trained staff allows both of these goals, and additional outcomes, to be met. Factors related to staffing considerations are shown in Figure 10.

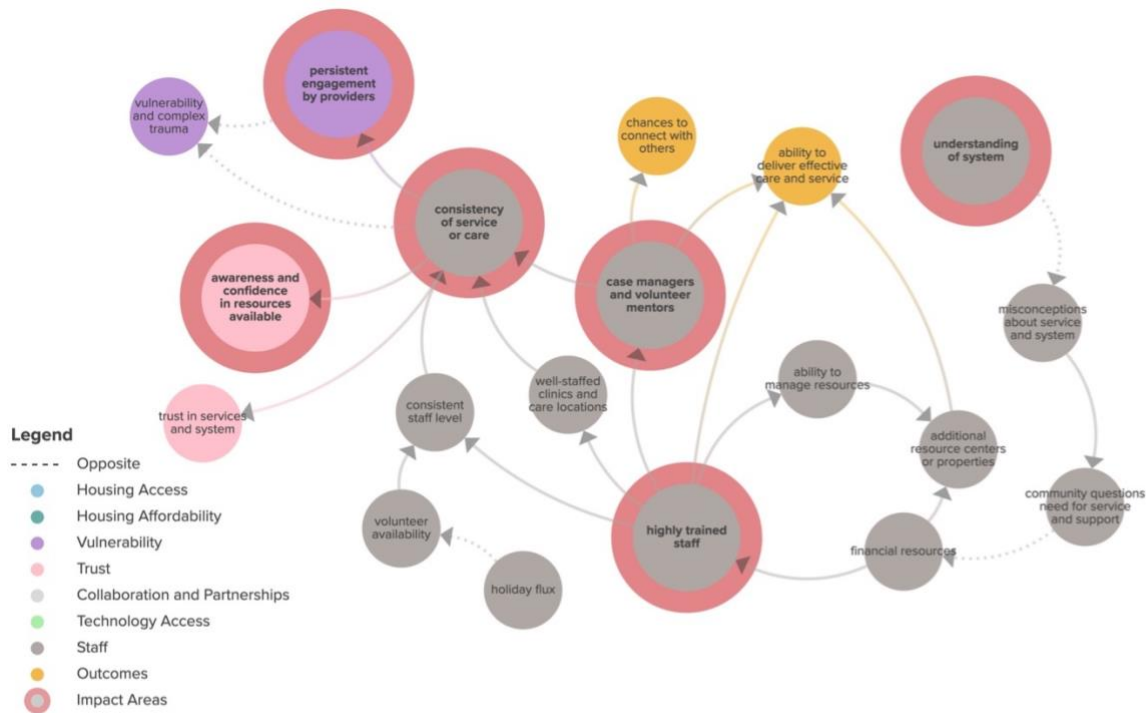


Figure 10: Systems map segment centered around consistent staff level and reliable service or care.

Many organizations have a volunteer staff, and those volunteer networks can be very effective. However, not all volunteers have the training to deliver specialized care, manage physical, personnel, and monetary resources, or be able to put in extra time beyond core critical operations to fundraise or network with other organizations. These tasks usually require trained or specialized staff, which in turn are more expensive for an organization to retain.

### Vignettes

When groups were asked what some of their biggest needs were, many of them pointed to the need for skilled staff who are able to show consistent professional support to their clients. Many also depend heavily on volunteer assistance and without consistency many areas of need fall on the staff (administrative and fundraising tasks are common examples) and can be put aside in favor of more pressing work. Efficient navigation of the system and successfully guiding clients through challenges comes with work experience and, when successful, builds trust in both programs and the system as a whole.

### Summary

Pathways for organizations serving those experiencing homelessness in any form to retain skilled staff, as well as education around the work that those organizations do are key opportunities in this space to ensure consistent, high-quality, and reliable service or care.

## Community-Based Outcomes

Positive outcomes are different for every individual and contextual to their situation and needs. A key factor that is present in many visions of positive outcomes is building a sense of community. A feeling of community is developed and reinforced by many factors: chances to connect with others with shared experiences and service or care tailored to one's lived experiences are enabled by case managers and volunteer mentors. Building life skills, education, and opportunities to connect with others reinforce the feeling of community. A deeper sense of community leads to higher well-being, feeling of safety and self-sufficiency, and equal engagement with society. Factors that enhance and lead from a feeling of community are shown in Figure 11.

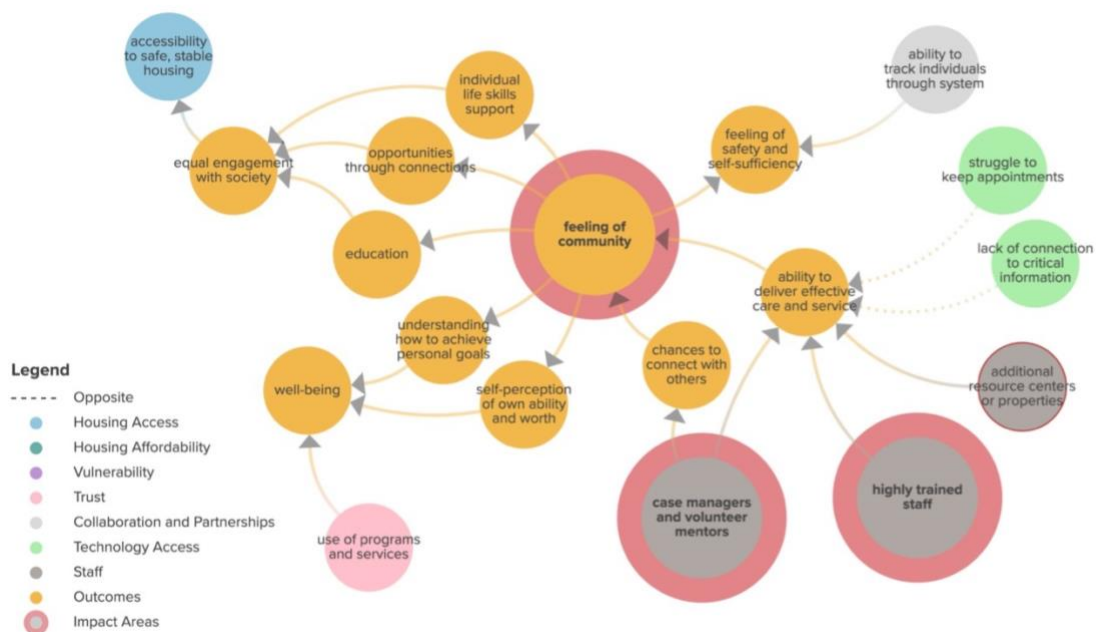


Figure 11: Systems map segment centered around positive outcomes identified for individuals experiencing homelessness.

Dedicated case managers and volunteer mentors can make a large difference for individuals through their work to deliver services and facilitate meaningful connections and networking. A case manager's work is also facilitated by the availability of information to longitudinally track individuals through the care or services they may have received. This especially correlates with the ability to deliver tailored service or care.

The outcomes from a feeling of community are large social gains: an improved self-perception of own ability or worth, and a better understanding of how to achieve personal goals are example outcomes that are related to a higher sense of well-being. A community as well provides a sense of safety, and self-sufficiency in the

context of the community. Finally equal engagement with society, from development of life skills, education, or new opportunities through connections, is a pathway to accessible, stable, and safe housing.

### *Vignettes*

One service provider framed the issue of homelessness as “a loss of community.” When homelessness is a result of loss of community, then finding ways to welcome individuals into a new community is necessary. Support and guidance leads to trust and brings increased courage to take on greater responsibilities. A sense of accomplishment brings feelings of self-worth and well-being. However, this path is not always straightforward. Stigmas and systemic boundaries can prevent individuals from rejoining society after incarceration, eviction, prolonged periods of joblessness, or returning from experiencing homelessness. Individual cases require personal approaches and that may need to include multiple types of services for complete rehabilitation.

### *Summary*

Opportunities to enhance positive outcomes are supporting the growth of community and the positive mechanisms it can build. A genuine and trusting community can in part be supported by the work of case managers and volunteer mentors to deeply engage with individuals in ways that are tailored to each individual. In turn, there are opportunities to enhance the availability of care data in a way that is respectful to the originators and beneficiaries of that data.

## **Highlighted Impactful, Innovative, or Unique Practices in the Denver Metro Area**

While learning about the homelessness ecosystem, we came across many talented, dedicated people taking on challenges in their community. We have highlighted a few of the programs and initiatives below that are unique and bringing new approaches to this system. Many of these initiatives are in pilot or testing mode and will have further development ahead to see their full potential. Some are also very specific to their area of the systems and provide only temporary solutions. For each impactful, innovative, or unique practice below, pros and cons are identified.

## **Prioritization for allocation of services**

### *Value and Impact*

Metro Denver Homelessness Initiative has engaged C4 Innovations , an organization advancing equitable housing solutions across the country to create a dynamic approach to prioritization. The process has started in mid 2021 and we look forward to its speedy progress. This could provide a much-needed update to the allocation of resources and address the lack of equity and flexibility in the current methods. Their goal is not to replace the VI SPDAT, but to create a better and more inclusive way to prioritize those entering the system.

The current process, which has been in use in many places for over a decade, makes use of a short questionnaire (VI-SPDAT) that gauges morbidity and makes a risk assessment based on the respondent's answers. While short, a risk assessment used for prioritization in services is a critically important touchpoint and an opportunity to meet individuals where they are to identify services best suited to their situation. VI-SPDAT has been seen as not responsive to the broad community of people experiencing homelessness, or seen as a difficult tool to implement as it requires individuals to divulge deeply personal information about possible sexual assault or exploitation, physical abuse, trauma, and events that may cause them great embarrassment to a stranger in an initial short interview (as little as 7 minutes). This can be a difficult process for many people and may run counter to certain groups communication norms. As responses are voluntary and not based on public record, an omitted response out of sensitivity or forgetfulness may result in a lower prioritization for services.

### *Connection to the map*

VI-SPDAT perceived as invasive, clarity in restrictions and eligibility, trust in services and system, awareness and confidence in resources available, accessibility to safe and stable housing

### *Pros and Cons*

Pros: If a more equitable and flexible prioritization method is created and adopted widely by the community then it would make large strides towards rebuilding trust in the overall system and reaching marginalized groups more effectively.

Cons: Any prioritization or entry mechanism holds an outsized amount of power over an individual's access to services. With finite resources available and a spectrum of individuals and families experiencing homelessness, some ways must be employed to help those most in need.

## **Built for Zero**

### *Value and Impact*

Built for Zero is an initiative that has been implemented in 89 different communities across the country and has begun crossing borders to other countries. It works toward a state called "functional zero". In essence, Functional Zero is when the number of new people, usually from a defined group of people such as military veterans or ex-wards of the state, using homelessness services (such as shelters etc.) in any specified time period (e.g. each month) and in a specified region (e.g. a town, city or state) is less than or equal to the number of people who exit homelessness through being housed or leaving the region (or dying). Functional zero is achieved through a coordinated approach that focuses efforts toward a specific population within the sub-groups experiencing homelessness. Most communities tackle veteran homelessness or chronic homelessness as the first sub-group. Focusing on veteran homelessness allows communities to build off of

government support already provided and build expertise and partnerships that can be leveraged for further successes.

While many efforts are limited by city, county, or state lines, this effort is different from the norm by seeking to build better unified teams to tackle homelessness from a broader context. The approach is one of better utilization of resources through real-time person-centric data collection and hosting and sharing with providers. This likens them more to an emergency response to a health crisis or natural disaster. They build a command center of decision makers and homelessness community leaders and are able to be nimble in addressing emergent needs and keep an urgency to the work. It also has a strong focus on collaboration with other stakeholders in the community, mentorship, and cohorts or other providers facing similar challenges in other communities.

The Built for Zero approach begins by doing an assessment of the community that is seeking to implement the program. This allows an understanding of the community and its systems. Often, they are engaged by a healthcare institution or leaders within a Continuum of Care that serves as an anchor institution. Next, they build out their command center. This group holds regular meetings and knows how to influence the local community and where key data is located or how to access it.

The command center of community decision makers, continuum of care, and providers builds a by-name list and begins analyzing from several areas of interest. How effective is the communication? What is the level of local buy-in? How easy is it to access and track? What systems may need to be built? How is coordinated entry being managed? A quality by-name list (QBNL) will provide consistent and timely data that can be used to accurately identify trends, needs, and progress towards ending homelessness. To be considered quality, your by-name list must be able to account for every individual experiencing homelessness. The list must have a reliability margin of 15% over a 3-month period. Inflows and outflows are accounted for and those moving through the system are tracked.

After the assessment is done and the command center is convened, they begin an improvement plan that outlines what changes are required to get each area working at the level needed. Concurrently, teams are connecting with others and building capabilities and learning new or augmented approaches. Cohorts are created to help others in each space and to develop and share best practices. There is also a gathering of groups over a 4 day period to look at trends, successes, and challenges that affect those working to end homelessness. Colorado has its own cohort that is focused on issues of import within the state.

As successes happen, teams gain confidence in the system and are able to work more cohesively with their other collaborators and access data that makes their work more effective. Communities that have achieved functional zero in a sub-group population are able to shift focus and bandwidth to prevention and maintaining a functional zero state.

The Colorado cohort, now composed of nine teams, supports an estimated 90% of people experiencing homelessness in the state. The action-focused, state-level team includes representation from public, private, healthcare, indigenous, veteran, and CoC agencies, with primary leadership stemming from the Office of Homeless Initiatives (OHI) within the Division of Housing, Colorado Department of Local Affairs (DOLA). Two other agencies play key roles — the Colorado Department of Human Services and the Department of Healthcare, Policy, and Financing — with Kaiser Permanente Colorado and the Colorado Health Foundation rounding out the partnership. This would cover the 4 Continuums of Care (all in Colorado) with a footprint of 21 counties. The first population groups they have focused on are veterans, with some including chronic homeless, early successes have already been shared. Fremont County has reached functional zero for veterans and that effort helped expose systemic challenges that needed to be addressed for the broader community of veterans experiencing homelessness.

### *Connection to map*

Comprehensive database, collaborations and strong partnerships, coordination of services, continuum of care focus, ability to deliver effective care and service, staffing

### *Pros and Cons*

Pros: Better coordination prevents wasted efforts, gaps in coverage for the communities and provides much needed focus on strategic evidence-based approaches to specific groups experiencing homelessness. The Community Solutions group specifically highlighted that homelessness is solvable and the approach has achieved success in many communities. One specific benefit that bears notice is that when this system is fully engaged and they have reached a “quality” status with their data, they can be very specific with their needs, the implementation, and efficacy of certain actions.

Cons: Some groups have highlighted that much effort is spent on the entry points and data collection, but lack the same level of effort to the largest and most difficult issue of housing shortages and housing accessibility.

## **Clustering and Decriminalization approaches**

### *Value and Impact*

It is estimated that 40-60 percent of people held in county jails in Colorado are there for failing to appear in court. Boulder has implemented a new approach to municipal warrants called warrant clustering. The basic premise of warrant clustering is that for non-violent crimes committed by individuals experiencing homelessness, the county waits to issue warrants until the individual has reached a threshold of three cases that they have failed to appear on. Once that threshold is reached, then Boulder “clusters” the warrants together so that one arrest is used to address those three cases. If someone does not meet that threshold, meaning they

get one or two non-violent cases where they fail to appear, then after six months, their cases are dismissed.

Prior to warrant clustering, if someone failed to appear on a littering ticket (as an example) then they would have an arrest warrant active for four years. Warrant clustering added an extra step to the warrant process by ensuring warrants only went out for violent cases and for people who are committing multiple quality of life type crimes and not engaging in the legal process voluntarily.

### *Connection to map*

Trust in services and system, clarity in restrictions and eligibility, use of programs and services, equal engagement with society

### *Pros and Cons*

Pros: Warrant clustering leads to fewer utilization of law enforcement and courthouse resources. This allows Boulder to use fewer arrests and have smaller jail dockets for quality-of-life crimes such as trespassing, open container of alcohol, and camping. During the trial period of warrant clustering (March 2019-Feb 2020) Boulder saw about a 40% reduction in arrests for municipal offenses compared to the 10-year historical average. Warrant clustering will reduce the number of individuals with an active warrant. Having an active warrant can prevent an individual from being eligible for housing vouchers, being eligible for Section 8 housing, or being able to get a job.

Cons: Warrant Clustering, over time, may create a false sense of escaping justice, may increase challenges in tracking, and as with any policy may have unintended consequences yet to be seen.

## **Social Impact Bond**

### *Value and Impact*

Social Impact Bonds are a unique type of performance-based contract where private and/or philanthropic lenders loan funds to accomplish a specific objective and are repaid based on whether the program achieves its goals. According to a report published in July 2021 by the City of Denver, starting in 2016 the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless and the Mental Health Center of Denver together with the City of Denver “leveraged 8.6 million from private investors to deliver supportive housing to people experiencing chronic homelessness and frequent mental and behavioral health crises. According to the SIB contract, if the program met its goals for keeping people housed and reducing their number of days in jail, the city would make outcome payments to the investors. If the program did not meet its outcome goals, the city would not repay the investors.” See the full report from the City of Denver for financial details of the program and social impacts, including on housing stability, criminal justice system outcomes, and health service outcomes. In brief, the Social Impact Bond has shown very promising positive



effects in all of these areas. The program, and its impacts, are expected to continue beyond the originally planned five-year duration.

### *Connection to map*

Accessibility to safe and stable housing, housing vouchers and rental assistance, ability to afford housing, use of programs and services

### *Pros and Cons*

Pros: By proactively engaging with individuals experiencing homelessness and providing a housing first model the community was able to both save money on the array of services that would historically be used by those same individuals and demonstrate a high degree of success in providing long term solutions for those who were part of the program.

Cons: The program is dependent on up-front investment and close collaboration with all parties involved. Scaling this effort up would mean a scaling up of all corresponding support around it to make it as effective as the pilot program.

## **Safe Outdoor Spaces and Safe Parking**

### *Value and Impact*

With some communities choosing to restrict or ban open camping, innovative approaches have become necessary to offset temporary shelter bed shortages related to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of increasing economic instability there is a growing population of people experiencing homelessness and at the same time, less and less availability of shelters and public spaces that can be used at capacity safely. Safe outdoor spaces and safe parking provide much needed support to these overtaxed systems. In addition, with good management and consistent regulation, they can provide a safe, clean, and consistent place to stay while individuals wait for programs or services to engage or as a temporary way to get back on their feet. Because these spaces offer clean water, bathrooms, and trash receptacles, they offer a more humane living situation and also reduce impacts to the environment by reducing stormwater contamination, trash and debris.

### *Connection to map*

Addressing vulnerability, trust in system, shelter alternative. Providing safe, sanctioned spaces for people to have shelter, and engage with services builds trust in the system and helps them return to find a place in the community. This reduces the stigma and rejection associated with being removed as a result of sweeps and mandatory clearing out of unsanctioned spaces. With the COVID-19 pandemic reducing access to normal shelters and creating economic hardships for a large section of the community, these temporary solutions can prevent individuals from experiencing more serious types of homelessness or reduce the period of time they are experiencing homelessness.

## *Pros and Cons*

Pros: With proper regulation and oversight, some communities that have created safe outdoor spaces and safe parking have yielded positive results and allowed for service providers to make targeted outreach and prevent individuals from being forced to be transient and therefore, harder to provide consistent aid to. Since the locations can be by the communities they are in, they prevent disruption of residential and businesses communities and the undesirable results associated with unsanctioned camping on public and private property. Many individuals seeking to escape homelessness or those returning from incarceration benefit from having a transitional space or alternative to diving directly into normal community life and expectations. These spaces allow for some individuals to adjust to a new lifestyle and with engagement of additional programs can start on a path to recovery.

Cons: Designation of safe outdoor spaces (SoS's) without community input has been problematic. These spaces do require consistent management and oversight to remain safe and clean, suggesting a need for stronger partnerships and coordination with the community and temporary infrastructure. These spaces can only support a relatively small number of individuals safely. Some individuals who provide services to those experiencing homelessness have expressed concerns about these types of spaces being used long term and that if there are no limits put on their use, they run the risk of making it easier or more comfortable to remain homeless instead of encouraging engaging individuals in programs to get them long-term housing solutions and other needed services.

## **Employment and Economic Opportunity for Those Who Previously Experienced Homelessness**

### *Value and impact*

Groups like Bridge House, The Denver VOICE, and Feet Forward employ and engage people who formerly experienced homelessness to accomplish their work and provide opportunities to give back. Bridge House uses their ready to work program as a way for individuals to secure job training and develop new skills. Feet Forward engages those formerly experiencing homelessness to help with outreach and to provide needs at one of their weekly events. This approach provides a way to both give back to their community and to help uplift those currently experiencing homelessness by providing mentorship and real-world examples to follow or learn from. See Section 7, "Recommendations in Practice" for more information.

### *Connection to map*

Providers with shared experiences, chances to connect with others, building community, trust in services and system

## *Pros and Cons*

Pros: Mentorship and of useful skill building while working towards self-sufficiency. Sense of accomplishment for those working and a visible example of success for those still experiencing homelessness.

Cons: These are primarily targeting specific subgroups of individuals experiencing homeless and are not accessible to all groups. The reach of these groups can be somewhat limited by their business focus and the types of employment or skills they develop and recruit for are also limited. Entrepreneurship is also necessarily high risk, and smaller organizations especially in the homelessness ecosystem are reliant on other organizations as partners and for resources.

## **Recommendations**

Recommendations are drawn directly from the systems map. Factors that have a unique angle or large impact on a critical factor – usually a factor with many inputs, many outputs, or that serve as a link in a cycle – are opportunity areas, and thus candidates for recommendations. Recommendations are framed as “How Might We?” questions, which are commonly used to phrase design opportunities to emphasize that there is a chance to ideate alternative solutions or paths forward. Thus the recommendations here are questions that invite future innovation.

The opportunity areas below are prioritized in order of their location in the systems map relative to the positive outcomes to be reinforced for those experiencing homelessness: a positive sense of well-being, a feeling of safety and self-sufficiency, and equal engagement with society – and an equitable path to accessible, stable, and safe housing. The recommendations below are focused on systemic changes that can have profound positive impacts for those experiencing homelessness, but also have benefits for all members of society.

The recommendations in practice are examples of organizations in the Denver Metro area and across the country that are already working to address some of the issues and opportunities demonstrated in our systems map. There are many such groups within the ecosystem and our list is not definitive, those chosen were based on references from our collaborators and our research. This information was mostly sourced from publicly available data on each organization. The pros and cons are an effort to show objective successes and challenges that exist for each organization in fully realizing the recommendations’ aim.

## **How might we improve pathways to affordable housing options that are equitably accessible for all residents in the Metro Denver area, regardless of what affordability looks like for each individual?**

This opportunity area encompasses all aspects of housing affordability and accessibility, including possible mechanisms to shifting perceptions around affordable housing and the risk of vulnerability, explore alternative housing arrangements, diversify new housing options, and pathways to make existing

housing equitably affordable and accessible to all. One example may be to leverage the successes of the Social Impact Bond program in placing individuals and families in housing. The successes made so far were leveraging the expertise of groups already serving these needs in the homelessness ecosystem and allowing them to quickly and effectively house a subsection of the community that would normally incur large costs to the emergency systems and were heavily justice involved. This helped to prove out the success of proactive approaches (housing first) and showing the savings to the community. Hopefully this has built trust in the effectiveness and will allow scaling to address a larger group of those experiencing homelessness.

### *Recommendations in practice:*

Across Colorado, there is a shortage of rental homes affordable and available to extremely low-income households. Please see Reducing Homelessness Requires Addressing our Failed American Housing Stability Strategy within this report for a more in-depth look at this issue. Accessibility to available units is also plagued with eligibility requirements and long wait lists.

### **Social Impact Bond:**

The Denver Supportive Housing Social Impact Bond Initiative (Denver SIB) provided housing and supportive case management services to approximately 300 individuals experiencing homelessness. These individuals were frequent users of the city's emergency services, including police, jail, the courts, and emergency rooms. The aim of this initiative was to increase housing stability for individuals who are considered chronically homeless and to shift funding from costly emergency services to housing subsidies and supportive services. Several studies have shown that people experiencing chronic homelessness need permanent, subsidized housing without preconditions or requirements and intensive services that are designed to maintain stability in housing. For more background information, please see Section 6d of this report.

This program was evaluated against a control group receiving care services within the community.

- Those referred to SIB supportive housing received 560 more days of housing assistance over three years, compared with those who received services as usual in the community.
- After accessing supportive housing, most participants stayed housed over the long term. After 3 years, 77% of participants stayed housed.
- Individuals within the program had less interaction with the criminal justice system. There was a 34% reduction in police contacts and a 40% reduction in arrests.
- Denver SIB supportive housing program participants used short-term or city-funded detoxification services less often. Over three years, people referred for supportive housing had four fewer visits to a detoxification

- facility than those who received usual services in the community. This represents a 65 percent reduction in the use of detoxification services. The differences between the two groups' uses of emergency medical services were not statistically significant.

### **Housing First:**

Housing First is an approach to addressing homelessness that prioritizes providing permanent housing. It does not require completion or participation in a program before individuals have access to housing. Studies have shown that individuals who participate in a Housing First model stay stably housed for longer periods. Housing First participants spent 73% of their time in stable housing compared with 32% of those who received treatment as usual. Current studies do not indicate a strong correlation with a reduction in substance abuse or psychiatric symptom outcomes. Several of the providers we spoke with felt that they were able to more easily engage with individuals who were housed to get them enrolled and engaged with wraparound services (substance abuse treatment, mental health, job training, healthcare etc.) more effectively.

Impact of housing on criminal justice interaction:

A study done in Boulder County helped illuminate the difference that housing can have and while these participants were most likely involved in other types of care, the results are striking. They looked at data from 40 individuals who were formerly experiencing homelessness but had gained housing in the past five years. Between those 40 individuals, they collectively racked up a total of 1,594 municipal criminal charges, 707 arrests, and 12,142 days in jail for issues related to Boulder Municipal Court matters before they got housing. After obtaining housing, those same 40 people have collectively incurred 11 municipal charges, most of them animal-related (unleashed dog) and none of them were arrested.

Pros: Quicker access to housing gets individuals off the streets and into a more stable environment. Case managers are able to provide services more effectively when the client is in a safe space for a longer period of time and isn't forced to move periodically.

Cons: Difficult to implement and scale when there is a shortage of housing in the community. Which limits the amount of individuals that are able to gain access.

### **Legislation - Housing Vouchers:**

In Colorado, 63,000 households utilize federal rental assistance to be able to keep a roof over their head. Federal rental assistance pays a percentage of the household's rent and renters can choose where they want to live. Although many individuals report that after they obtain a voucher, they have a hard time finding a landlord willing to accept it. Around 10% of housing voucher holders in Denver reported that they faced some sort of income discrimination.

House Bill 20-1332 was passed in Colorado, which prevents housing discrimination based on the individual's source of income. It became effective in January 2021 and will help those using vouchers find housing by preventing landlords. This study analyzed utilization rates in specific areas before and after legislation was enacted. Utilization rates increased in locations where source of income laws are present by a range of four to eleven percentage points.

**Pros:** Widespread legislation gives individuals a cause of action when a landlord discriminates against them based on their usage of a voucher. Enforcement of this legislation will lower discrimination and contribute to higher utilization rates of housing vouchers.

**Cons:** Legislation can often be slow to enactment and implementation. To be effective legislation must be coupled with enforcement efforts, but individuals do not often know their rights or have the resources to enforce their rights.

**How might we support persistent engagement by providers, consistency of service or care across providers, and build trust in providers to be able to reach and help all people before that help is critical?**

This opportunity area supports bringing people who are in a vulnerable state out of a vulnerable state, supports building trust in providers over repeated engagement, and ultimately supports the positive use of programs and services to ensure homelessness is something experienced only briefly, if ever. A possible mechanism to support this opportunity area is building awareness and confidence in resources available so that if they are needed, those resources can be found and relied upon. Additionally, better tracking of service availability, and individuals needs will prevent service interruption and allow for providers to quickly re-engage accurately.

*Recommendations in Practice*

**Exemplars in building trust**

**Feet Forward:** The nonprofit, Feet Forward, was founded by a person who had experienced homelessness first hand. Her organization has a unique approach, utilizing firsthand experience and insight into that community has allowed her to build trust and opened access to other service providers and even the justice system for the individuals who use her services. The organization is built on a foundation of knowledge of homelessness derived from lived experience. Their expertise is based in Boulder, Colorado, and extends from previous interactions between homelessness and criminal justice, substance abuse, and mental health systems in that community.

Their mission is as follows:

Feet Forward exists to improve the lives of the unhoused members of the Boulder Community:

- By leveraging its unique peer-led volunteers with their lived experience of homelessness to make it easier for unhoused people to access needed support services in a way that is non-threatening and enhances their dignity.
- By providing direct street outreach to connect unhoused people with mental health support, addiction treatment, nutritious food, job training, and long-term housing.
- And by helping to create an environment of increased understanding and respect among members of the greater Boulder community through relationship building with businesses, faiths, providers of housing, and the criminal justice system.

Feet Forward also provides a number of services for the community that address many areas of life. They use a public gathering place (Boulder Bandshell) of the homeless community to hold a weekly open event. At this event they provide the services like weekly hot meals, clothes and supplies adapting to seasonal needs, low-barrier peer support groups and services, portable charging stations to enhance connectivity, and free haircuts as a means to boost morale and self esteem. They believe that “When you feel better, you do better.” They meet those in need where they are and supply resources and information based on the individual’s needs, and help to increase housing pathways through voluntary reunification, assessment, and help with accessing other housing resources.

Pros: Their peer-led approach helps build trust quickly and speeds up the path to engagement. This approach also helps to continue the continuity of community and transitions these individuals out of homelessness with a built-in network of support.

Cons: This model is very specific to the individuals who helped form it and the unique dedication and lived experience they provide. They also are not able to cover every area of need and must depend on the other members of their community and their continuum to engage and fill those needs.

### **Exemplars in building community**

**Second Chance Center:** For many returning from incarceration, the list of impacts that push them towards homelessness or recidivism is long. Without a ready support system to help them re-enter society, many bounce between homelessness and the justice system. This organization helps to unite and build community ties back to those who have been severed from public life or never developed healthy lifestyle choices as a result of incarceration. Second Chance Center is a Colorado based nonprofit organization determined to be the state’s premier community re-entry program and a model for the nation. SCC offers case management, mentoring, and vital resources to assist formerly incarcerated individuals in reestablishing their lives and becoming successful members of the community.

The cycle of criminal behavior is difficult to break and often involves a comprehensive approach to address a host of issues, including but not limited to substance abuse, violence, trauma and socioeconomic factors.

Their clients are often unaware of the impact these factors have had on the course of their lives and their ability to actively choose a better path, which is why they mentor their clients to wisely navigate their unique needs and circumstances and help them make the most of their second chance.

Led by the vision of Executive Director, Hassan A. Latif, their team of caring professionals offer education, assistance, support and resources to the formerly incarcerated. SCC is transforming lives as they lower recidivism and positively impact the community.

Since its inception in 2012, the organization has served nearly 4,000 people. Second Chance Center's clients have a recidivism rate of less than 10%, compared to the 50% Colorado statewide average.

Their approach is one of non-judgement and with a robust staff, many of whom have lived experience as formerly incarcerated individuals, they are able to provide the formerly incarcerated, and their network, with education, resources, and support to successfully re-enter the community and cultivate a rewarding life.

They offer a host of services to their "returning citizens" which include meeting both mental and physical needs. Working to undo, in some cases, a lifetime of trauma and instill good habits and positive thought patterns, they host cognitive restructuring, group and individual mentorship, addiction, and relationship counseling. They also help with employment services, housing, and transportation which reduces the chances of them experiencing homelessness or engaging in recidivism.

Pros- With skilled team members who have successfully navigated the difficult road back from incarceration, they are able to provide a host of services that meet the immediate need and prepare their clients for long term success with a true wrap-around approach.

Cons- Scaling this effort to meet the needs of the entire community will require a larger investment of funding, access to housing, skilled staff and championing at the highest levels of government.

**Senior Support Services, Urban Peak, Mobile Loaves and Fishes: Please see the Case studies section for more details.**



## How might we innovate staffing models and funding models of homelessness providers to enhance the quality and consistency of services delivered by skilled professionals, including long-term case management?

Highly trained staff, including dedicated case managers, are key to sustained delivery of high-quality and consistent services by providers. This opportunity area is to identify ways to ensure consistent staffing throughout the year to deliver sustained high-quality service. Opportunities may include amplifying the awareness of quality of providers' work and their values, innovating staffing or training models for organizations that are currently primarily volunteer-operated and in need of highly trained full-time staff, or encouraging entrepreneurial endeavors of people who have previously experienced homelessness. Innovative pathways may include partnerships that share staff between organizations or share training resources. Those who have previously experienced homelessness themselves are valuable members of the community who can build trust and serve as role models for people currently experiencing homelessness.

### *Recommendations in Practice*

#### **Exemplars in encouraging entrepreneurship**

**The Denver VOICE:** This organization has been in existence since 1996 with the original focus being for and by those experiencing homelessness. Their model has transformed and has implemented a strong focus of providing employment through its vendor program.

The vendor program is designed to give individuals experiencing homelessness, poverty, or those in need of an immediate income the opportunity to work. Vendors might be physically living on the streets, or they might be housed, but out of a job or in need of additional living income. Since 2007, more than 4,600 people have found financial stability through their vendor program. They currently average around 50 vendors working each month.

This provides homeless and/or impoverished individuals with a chance to take their first steps towards a more stable life. The issues that often underlie homelessness tend to make it very difficult for someone experiencing homelessness to obtain and keep a regular job. The combination of income-earning opportunities, job-flexibility, and job-training offered by their vendor program give a struggling individual the chance to work a flexible schedule, learn (or re-learn) workplace expectations, and earn sufficient income to move off the street.

Pros- A low barrier for entry and easy to navigate structure allows vendors to quickly and easily begin making some supplemental income. The model could be adapted to include other types of work and provide more paths to these types of income generation.

Cons- Without further diversification, there is a limitation in the amount of vendors or the scalability of their current model.

**Bridge House: Please see the Case studies section for more details.**

### **How might we improve the clarity, consistency, and equity of eligibility requirements for services?**

Transparency in eligibility requirements for services or programs is a key pathway to building trust in the system and the use of those services or programs. Equity refers to ensuring that people who are experiencing homelessness or who may soon be experiencing homelessness have eligibility requirements matched to a range of backgrounds, so all youth experiencing homelessness have similar eligibility requirements, as do those recently exiting the criminal justice system. Better coordination between service providers and streamlining of requirements is needed to enable clarity, consistency, and equity of service and housing eligibility across the region. Clustering and decriminalization approaches are one possible pathway to pursue in, for example, helping to reduce the impact of warrant checks for minor offenses.

#### *Recommendations in practice*

While staff within an organization are often key resources to navigating the complex eligibility requirements for certain services, a more comprehensive framework would help individuals experiencing homeless self-navigate through the system and obtain the resources needed. Eligibility barriers are program rules that establish criteria for who may receive the benefit as well as time limits on receipt. These barriers vary widely for different services. Resource aggregation and self-navigation tools can remove structural barriers that prevent individuals from seeking help.

#### **Eligibility Requirements and Resource Aggregation:**

Homeless Management Information System (HMIS):

Homeless Management Information Systems are key to providing individuals with the services they need. This system is utilized to track client and program outcomes, measure system performance, and inform regional coordination. These are generally used within a Continuum of Care for a specific region, with increasing collaboration between regions leading to better service provision and tracking of client needs and outcomes. HMIS allows case managers to coordinate around the clients' needs and prevents the client from having to re-tell their story every time they engage in a new service. HMIS is a major component of the data gathering (Quality By-Name list) that Built for Zero uses to improve and accelerate outcomes in the communities they have worked with.

Pros: Allows more streamlined and effective collaboration between service providers and the clients. Having quality data helps inform where gaps exist and client needs are not being met.

Cons: Organizations must have access to HMIS and have staff to oversee and ensure correct data entry. Some concerns have been voiced regarding fraud and multiple entries from the same client.

#### Mile High United Way – 211

The 2-1-1 network is a free and confidential resource that connects individuals experiencing homelessness to resources in the Denver community. In 2019, Mile High United Way received 92,698 contacts. Most individuals are looking for help meeting basic needs like housing, food, transportation, and health care. 211 connects individuals to community resource specialists in the area who can put them in touch with local organizations that provide critical services. 81% of individuals followed up the referral and of those, 43% received the help they needed.

Pros: Community resource specialists can quickly connect individuals with the services they need. It also creates a repository of resources

Cons: Individuals must be aware of the resource and be able to engage.

#### **Decriminalization:**

The Boulder municipal program, called Warrant Clustering, involves a judge “staying” warrants related to municipal crimes for homeless individuals. These crimes are nonviolent offenses. If no new charges are filed after six months, these cases are dismissed. However, if the defendant accumulates three “stayed” warrants in a six-month period, all three are clustered together or prosecuted by the city prosecutor’s office. See Section 6c to learn more about Boulder’s approach to municipal warrants. A report was recently issued that studied the impact of warrant clustering in Boulder County. The study yielded several key insights:

- The program led to an average reduction of 4.32 municipal bookings per week in Boulder after its implementation on March 1, 2019.
- It is estimated that the Warrant Clustering Program led to cost savings of at least \$107,852.16 but as high as \$492,524.86
- It is estimated that the Warrant Clustering program saved between 4.3 – 7.2 hours per week (224.69 – 374.49 hours per year) of police officer time in arresting and booking defendants
- Longmont was used as a control group for this study. Municipal bookings from Longmont were unaffected during this time period.

## How might coordination and collaboration between providers and government agencies for those experiencing homelessness be enhanced, including data transparency, human-centered data collection methods, and marketing or outreach efforts to build awareness?

Collaboration between providers and organizations serving those experiencing homelessness is essential. Continued engagement post-pandemic through the Homelessness Leadership Council or other conveners like Denver's HOST is necessary to share best practices and closer partnerships will have a chance to develop and mature. Programs like Built for Zero are a promising possibility to enhance organizations' ability to collaborate and confidently know their role and impact within an ecosystem of providers. Their effort will build the framework for more clarity and transparency in sharing data in a clear and accessible way like many communities have begun to achieve. New methods of prioritizing allocation (alternatives to the VISPDAT) of services are another avenue that may be able to enhance the human experience of a risk assessment or other data entry required for access to services.

### *Recommendations in Practice*

#### **Exemplar for statewide collaboration**

**Built for Zero:** This statewide effort helps to stitch together the fractured approaches that come with individual counties and cities all making their own action plans and the lack of continuity between political administrations. Please see section 6b.1a under Highlighted Impactful, Innovative, or Unique Practices in the Denver Metro Area for more information.

#### **Exemplar for provider collaboration**

**Homeless Leadership Council:** With the increased need for new strategies at the onset of the pandemic in 2019, several of the largest providers of services for those experiencing homelessness formed a group to share resources, knowledge, and unite their voices around policy measures for their community. Traditionally the city has been the convener of these types of groups and this type of coalition is rare and unique. Since many groups compete for resources and have different philosophies, these types of groups can be difficult to form. Throughout our interviews this group was mentioned as an unexpected bright spot in the pandemic where, in some cases, daily meetings helped groups to act quickly and share best practices to deal with the issues they were collectively facing.

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, Francis Center, The Salvation Army, Urban Peak, Volunteers of America

The HLC has used their platform to put out several press releases to communicate their stance on various measures and areas that affect their focus.

Pros: To make meaningful and lasting change in this system requires a clarity of focus and singularity of purpose that is only strengthened by a close-knit group of collaborators pooling their resources and uniting their voice for their collective good.

Cons: While they represent many of the largest service providers, some groups not represented in the council, have not sided with their opinions on issues of policy and advocates have spoken out publicly through press releases to dissent from their opinions.

### **Exemplar for governmental collaboration**

**HOST:** Created by a mayoral executive order in October 2019 the Department of Housing Stability (HOST) is committed to ensuring all Denverites have a roof over their heads. They invest resources, create policy, and partner with various organizations to help keep residents in the homes that they already live in, quickly resolve an experience of homelessness, and connect residents to new housing opportunities.

To support these efforts, the department helps to:

- Stabilize residents at risk of involuntary displacement and connect residents to housing resources.
- Support residents experiencing a crisis and connect them to overnight shelter, services, and short-term and permanent housing
- Create and preserve existing affordable housing and connect residents at any income level to new housing opportunities

The most recent 5 year plan outlines incremental change and significant goals for growth. To meet this challenge in a larger way would mean for there to be a removal of many systemic barriers that limit population density and would require significant investment in building of deeply affordable housing. Laws governing zoning and multifamily units would need to be revisited across the entire region. With some of the discussions we conducted, many felt that there needs to be a bigger and more impactful push to meet the needs of the Metro Denver Community.

Pros: The city has brought together a strong team of experts and expanded its focus around homelessness with what appears to be an achievable 5 year plan.

Cons: Some groups have voiced that there is need for heavier emphasis on homelessness as an issue and stronger leadership at city and state level in tackling it would bring about swifter and more substantive change.

### **How might access to critical online or electronic information be improved for those without reliable or consistent technology access?**

This opportunity area encompasses the many technological factors that contribute to an inconsistent ability to access critical information that is online or in an electronic format for those experiencing homelessness. This impacts many domains from healthcare, financial accounts, job documents, and housing applications. There are opportunities to enhance the consistency of access to technology or internet, shift expectations of who has access to what resources, and innovating new ways of accessing critical information by considering access points, times, and required interactions.

#### **Recommendations in Practice**

**My Digital Data Locker:** Applying for housing, jobs, and certain services requires individuals to show eligibility through documents such as birth certificates, social security cards, driver's licenses, etc. When individuals lack housing, having safe storage for vital documents can be extremely difficult. Case managers spend considerable amounts of time helping clients replace documents, efforts that limit their capacity to address the clients' underlying causes of housing instability.

The city of Baltimore is launching My Digital Data Locker, an innovative cloud-based platform that gives people who are experiencing homelessness a secure place to manage digital copies of vital documents. Photos can be uploaded to this secure platform via cellphone. Clients control their accounts and can grant individuals access to their documents when necessary. My Digital Data Locker is an open-source platform and can be adapted and scaled by other jurisdictions.

Pros: Individuals can selectively grant case managers and service providers access to their data within a matter of minutes. This can decrease time to receipt of services for the individuals and increase capacity of case managers.

Cons: This service requires access to a cellphone or computer for uploading and accessing their documents. Individuals must also trust that their data and information will be kept safe.

# Case Studies

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There are a variety of programs doing impactful work in meeting the different needs of people experiencing homelessness. These case studies represent a sampling of programs that have exciting and positive outcomes in Colorado and other states.

## Mobile Loaves and Fishes: Austin, TX

A few miles outside Austin, Texas, Mobile Loaves and Fishes created a 51-acre community that houses hundreds of those who are experiencing homelessness in the region.<sup>xiii</sup> The Community First! Village is a fully integrated community that provides affordable and permanent housing for hundreds of people. The property also includes amenities for its residents where they can enjoy the services, but also participate in the Community Works training program. This program allows residents to work alongside Mobile Loaves and Fishes volunteers and learn new skills and to earn an income. Amenities and job training sites include but are not limited to an art house, cinema, car garage, market, farm and garden, health center, and woodworking shop.

The Community First! Village includes two phases; phase I includes 27 acres and houses 200 people in 100 RV/Park homes and 130 micro-homes, while phase II adds an additional 24 acres, bringing the entire property to 51 acres and more than 500 homes. In an attempt to build a larger sense of community, none of the homes have running water so residents use the communal laundry, restrooms, and shower facilities. This large community provides homes and a community for a significant number of those experiencing homelessness in the Austin region. According to Ending Community Homelessness Coalition (ECHO), as of January 2021 there were 3,160 people experiencing homelessness in Austin and Travis County.<sup>xiv</sup> As of February 2021, the Community First! Village houses about 200 people or 6.3% of those who are currently experiencing homelessness.

The Mobile Loaves and Fishes program takes a unique approach to solving homelessness as there is no particular goal to transition or “graduate” residents out of and away from the community. In 2018, the community had an 86 percent retention rate. The program focuses on creating a strong community for the residents where they will want to stay, work, and take care of their new life and the people around them. All residents are required to pay rent, which covers about 40 percent of the village’s \$5 million operating budget.<sup>xv</sup>

The city of Austin’s population in 2021 was 1,011,790 people.<sup>xvi</sup> The people experiencing homelessness in Austin is about 0.31% of the total population. In 2019, Governor Greg Abbott said that the city of Austin spent more than \$20,000 per homeless person.<sup>xvii</sup> Although, other studies have found that Austin is spending closer to \$28,000 per homeless person. The Community First! Village includes more

than 500 homes and 13 community laundry rooms, restrooms and shower facilities. The eligibility requirements for the Community First! Village are as follows. The individual must be chronically homeless, have been in Travis County for at least one year, complete a background check and have the ability to pay monthly rent.<sup>xviii</sup> The approval process for applications into the community varies and can take up to one year or more.

According to Mobile Loaves and Fishes' most recent Annual Report, they receive help from 14,820 volunteers a year that commit 46,684 hours of service.<sup>xix</sup> The organization also staffs 60 people who help the residents of the community earn a total \$786,000 of dignified income. Formerly homeless artists, makers and hospitality contractors work in the Community Works micro-enterprise programs. Mobile Loaves and Fishes spends \$7,682,959 on their program services, 87% of their functional expenses. The remaining expenses include \$589,909 for fundraising and \$539,530 for management and general expenses, totaling to \$8,812,298.

### **Bridge House's Ready to Work Program: Boulder & Aurora, CO**

Bridge House's Ready to Work in Boulder and Aurora, CO is a 9-to-12-month program created to give people experiencing homelessness a path to self-sufficiency through a "work first" model.<sup>xx</sup> This comprehensive program provides work experience, housing, and support for its participants, allowing them to get back on their feet in a controlled environment. A successful participant of the Ready to Work program will be living in permanent housing and working a mainstream job after 9-12 months; according to their annual report, 72 percent of the program's participants met those goals in 2020.<sup>xxi</sup>

Participants of the Ready to Work program have two options for employment: landscaping or food service. There are 94 positions available throughout the entire organization with 44 available in Boulder and 50 in Aurora. The Ready to Work program employs their participants to work up to 29 hours per week earning \$11.10/hour and giving participants the ability to save money and build a resume and references. After participants have successfully worked for about seven months, they begin to start looking for mainstream employment. While participants are in the program, they live in housing provided by Ready to Work. In total, the program housed and employed 94 people in 2020.<sup>xxii</sup>

Ready to Work provides three meals a day, on site laundry, computer access, a library, and proximity to the services and employment sites. To remain in the program, residents must maintain sobriety and savings from their employment. Each Ready to Work unit costs an estimated \$85,000, while the program states that a traditional housing unit costs about \$400,000.<sup>xxiii</sup>

The final branch of the program includes support in everything from financial management and job readiness classes to sobriety support and mentoring. The support branch provides personalized resources for participants and creates a sense of community through small group programs and collaborative opportunities. All the



support resources include savings and financial management, bi-weekly case management, bi-weekly group meetings, 4 topic areas of job readiness classes, career counseling, sobriety supporting, mentoring, and computer training.

According to Bridge House, the cost of doing nothing for people experiencing homelessness is much more expensive than paying for the services that they offer. Boulder County Public Health reports the highest users of Boulder County detox, hospital, and ambulance services cost \$150,000 per year, and the CO Department of Corrections reports spending \$45,000 per year in costs associated with prison stays.<sup>xxiv</sup> The Common Sense Institute report, "The Economic Footprint of Homelessness in Metro Denver," found that nearly \$500 million is spent on services, health care and housing for people experiencing homelessness. The Ready to Work program, on the other hand, reports \$10,000 in costs for one year of housing and support services that require government support and \$5,000 in social enterprise expenses. Their participants typically accrue a savings of \$15,000 or 15% in trainee wages that are funded by the social enterprise partners. They believe the total community cost for a Ready to Work graduate is \$0.<sup>xxv</sup>

According to the program's latest annual report, Ready to Work graduates stay connected with the program and can continue to receive support around career advancement, sobriety and other issues. The report notes that "over 80 percent of graduates are still housed and employed 12 months after graduation."<sup>xxvi</sup>

Bridge House's Ready to Work program is an effective work-first model for those individuals that are ready to participate. Not all people experiencing homelessness will be the right fit for the program, but for those who are ready to work, the holistic model has proven capable of breaking expensive cycles of homelessness, addiction, and incarceration. Further, the model is predicated upon being a community-based solution that is targeted to the unique needs of the communities it is offered in. For those reasons, the City of Aurora's mayor and bipartisan members of Aurora City Council have expressed support for the program at recent City Council meetings.

### **Urban Peak: Denver, CO**

Urban Peak provides a full range of programs and services that help youth ages 15-25 experiencing homelessness in the region.<sup>xxvii</sup> Through a multi-faceted approach, Urban Peak strives to put youth on a path toward self-sufficiency. In many cases, youth experiencing homelessness are or have been involved with the foster care system. Urban Peak provides these and other youth with safe spaces and resources to become independent and successful members of society.

Urban Peak's services include a 40-bed shelter, drop-in center, supportive services including education and employment programs, and additional long-term housing resources for the youth that they serve. The shelter is open for youths ages 15-20 and is open 24/7. While staying at the shelter, residents work with a case manager to improve their situation and have access to a medical clinic three days a week.

According to Urban Peak’s 2020 annual report, 11,102 total nights were spent at their shelter by individual youth.<sup>xxviii</sup> The drop-in center provides an additional safe haven where youth can receive a hot breakfast Monday through Friday, safely place their possessions in a locker, do laundry, take a shower, and have access to first aid supplies. In 2020 at the drop-in center, 15,790 meals were served, 175 youths participated in life skills groups, and 3,014 laundry and showers were provided.<sup>xxix</sup>

Urban Peak provides educational and professional development resources for their program participants to help them become self-sufficient adults. They provide services to assist enrolling or reenrolling in GED programs, high school classes, and even college and trade school programs. Their education programs, available for ages 15-24, include group and one on one tutoring. The employment program includes job readiness training, job specific certifications, and real-world opportunities at Urban Peak’s social enterprise “Peak Thrift” shop. This shop creates an opportunity for youth to earn real world experience, similar to Bridge House’s Ready to Work program. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act helps fund these short-term services and allows Urban Peak to utilize federal funds to help develop Colorado’s homeless youth.

Through varying housing programs, Urban Peak maintains 120 transitional housing units for youth experiencing homelessness in Denver. A case manager identifies which of the programs a participant should be assigned to, and then the participant lives in one of Urban Peak’s three apartment complexes in the Metro Denver region. In 2020, 163 youth adults and children were served by these programs and 81% of those participants maintained housing for six months or longer.<sup>xxx</sup> These three buildings are owned and operated by the non-profit.

Urban Peak offers four main housing programs, STAR, Rowan Gardens, Rox’s Place and a community housing program. Together, these programs provide youth with housing and offer supportive services including case management, individual and group therapy, education and employment programming and access to health care. Community dinners and recreational activities further support youth in their efforts to build positive relationships and develop independence, moving toward self-sufficiency.<sup>xxxi</sup>

Case managers are constant resources for program participants and can guide them on their journeys to becoming self-sufficient adults. 2,809 hours were committed to case management in 2020 for youth participating in one of Urban Peak’s housing programs.<sup>xxxii</sup> These programs help youth build the necessary life skills to avoid returning to a situation of homelessness. Through street outreach in 2020, Urban Peak case managers helped 246 youth connect to systems of care and helped 74 young people move from the streets to safe housing in 2020.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

By providing shelter, housing, case management, and extra resources, Urban Peak diverts spending away from reactionary policies and programs surrounding the unhoused community. The organization estimates a community savings of \$8.4 million. According to the 2020 Impact Report, “These savings include money that

would be spent on incarceration, law enforcement officers, judicial fees and temporary court holdings as well as avoiding emergent and urgent health care costs such as hospital stays, substance abuse detox programs, mental health screenings and dental emergencies.”<sup>xxxiv</sup> Further, Urban Peak estimates that over the next 10 years, the return on investment for the organization could total more than \$20.7 million by preventing chronic homelessness among the youth it serves.<sup>xxxv</sup> These savings include not only reduced legal and health care costs, but also increased wages. Youth are more likely to earn higher wages, achieve stable housing, secure access to healthcare and address personal challenges when engaged with Urban Peak for at least three months.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

## **Senior Support Services: Denver, CO**

Senior Support Services (SSS) is a day center for hungry and homeless seniors in Denver, CO, founded in 1976. The day center is a safe place for seniors to spend time, socialize with others, and participate in activities. Alongside meals, transportation, food and clothing banks, and access to computers and the internet, SSS provides access to medical care, health screenings, and mental health care—Denver Health, which provides health care and emergency services to a large portion of Denver’s homeless population, provided an estimated \$175.9 million in uncompensated care to the homeless in 2020. SSS also provides financial counseling and helps its clients find housing, pay rent and utility payments, and sign up for benefits and government programs.

Though its programs do not provide all-encompassing shelter services, it ensures that homeless seniors have access to many important services and necessities. There are many resources for people experiencing homelessness, but there is a gap in the care offered to seniors experiencing homelessness—to receive care from SSS, a person must be 60 years or older. Case managers provide clients individual assistance with obtaining government benefits, purchasing and retaining affordable housing, paying rent and utilities, mediating tenant-landlord disputes, preventing homelessness through financial management counseling, and connecting to healthcare providers and health-related services. They also lead Care Coordination in complex client situations.

According to its list of accomplishments, Senior Support Services provided care for 1,540 hungry and homeless seniors at their facility.<sup>xxxvii</sup> This includes 62,600 individual meals and 4,386 emergency food items. The pandemic forced SSS to reduce hours and capacity, but staff were still able to serve food. They also distributed 4,020 clothing items and 12,000 hygiene items during the peak of the pandemic. The organization does not have its own sheltering facilities, but it assisted with obtaining or retaining shelter or housing on 2,497 occasions. SSS provided 25 household “starter kits,” furniture and décor for 15 households, moved 5 seniors, and provided long-term storage for 100 homeless seniors. Case workers also helped their clients navigate the government benefit system 2,713 times over the year and obtained legal aid for 260 seniors.

Access to transportation has a major impact on any senior's life, especially if he/she is experiencing homelessness—an unhoused lifestyle requires constant mobility. In 2020, Senior Supportive Services distributed 1,190 free round-trip bus tickets and 755 free monthly bus passes and transported 75 clients to various medical, governmental, and other necessary engagements. They also connected seniors with primary and specialty health care providers 1,556 times. Licensed Professional Counselors also provided 475 individual mental health or substance use counseling sessions to 95 seniors. In 2019, SSS spent almost \$1.24 million on its Senior Center, of which \$121,000 went to housing and utility assistance.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

Senior Support Services stands out as a unique program because of its emphasis on self-sufficiency and personal responsibility among the senior community. Clients come seeking the resources that they need to improve their living situations and are met with staff and volunteers who can successfully help people who do not have the technological or life experience to navigate complicated government and healthcare systems. In 2020, SSS served 1,540 people over the age of 60. The senior community experiencing homelessness has different needs than youth and adults that are experiencing homelessness, and Senior Support Services understands those differences.

## Homelessness and Housing Affordability

**Author: Peter LiFari**

### *Reducing Homelessness Requires Addressing our Failed American Housing Stability Strategy*

#### Introduction

At this very moment, our fellow Coloradans are in peril, their health and wellbeing deteriorating, their tents pitched across city streets, parks, bridges, across our hearts and minds, metastasizing in size and severity since the outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020. We Coloradans are in a state of deep distress, a pallor of collective grief hangs over our beloved state, as if the poor air quality index of the 2021 summer was not caused by wildfires, ozone pollution and climate change but by our depression, clouding out our hope, choking our Colorado beautiful. The five stages of grief play out in a continuous feedback loop amongst housed and unhoused Coloradans alike. Denial, isolation, anger, bargaining, depression and then acceptance - a cruel status quo indeed.

Yet, the majority of Coloradans are united in our joint desire to resolve the trauma and pain impacting our unhoused Coloradans, we simply differ as to the factors that motivate us and disagree on the policy solutions that ultimately will lead to their support, and thus support our great state. As humans we are compelled to support one another in our time of need, our unhoused Coloradans plight, is our joint societal plight, for we are one and the same. To help make sense of what we are

collectively experiencing, it helps to look to our past, to the generations of Americans before us for guidance, it hasn't always been this way, or has it?

Homelessness and the resulting proliferation of homeless encampments is not a new phenomenon in American society. Upon review, these periods of increased homelessness occur in cycles, spurred on by rapid declines in available employment, such as that experienced during the Great Depression, severe housing supply shortages following periods of war, such as after the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, World War 2, and Vietnam. Today we find ourselves once again in a period of rapidly increasing homelessness as we complete over 20 years of combat in the Middle East, a raging pandemic which halted our economy virtually overnight and highly restrictive land use and planning methodologies deployed by our cities and counties as a means of shaping housing development in a desired context has created a severe housing supply crisis, the likes not seen in America since the great housing shortage of post WW2.

Our current national state of homelessness, numbering over 580,000 and growing as January 2020 (we don't have reliable numbers this year due to COVID-19 impacting the annual point in time count)<sup>xxxix</sup> illuminates the extreme disparities in housing stability experienced in low income communities, most acutely in black, and indigenous people of color.<sup>xi</sup> While Black Americans represent 13% of our country's total population, they make up 39% of chronically homeless individuals, and 23% of homeless Americans identified as Hispanic or Latino. Disparities at this scale indicate that homelessness is not a failure of the individual, rather this is a failure of our American housing stability strategy. Reducing the number of Coloradans currently experiencing homelessness, over 6,000 in Metro Denver in 2020, and the thousands on the precipice, requires a reinvigorated, systemic approach to our entire American housing continuum with a hyper focus on increasing the supply of new affordable housing units.<sup>xii</sup>

## What is the Root Cause?

Homelessness is directly impacted by the availability of affordable housing.<sup>xlii</sup> When communities have significant affordable housing options, Coloradans experiencing homelessness are low in number, and short in duration. Sadly this is not our current situation, not by a long shot. As of July 2021 Colorado has a shortage of 113,110 rental homes that are affordable and available to extremely low and low income Coloradans.<sup>xliii</sup> The number of extremely low income (ELI) Coloradans is not immaterial. Currently, 74% of 162,000 ELI Coloradan renters pay 50% of their income on their rent each month, living on the dangerous edge of eviction. While Colorado has struggled to build enough deeply affordable housing options to meet the needs of our ELI Coloradans for many years, what is unprecedented is the broader affordable, and workforce housing supply shortage, that has traditionally

proven to be available in greater quantities. As a prime example of our extreme housing imbalance, let us look at the concerning case of our disappearing single family starter homes, which have long functioned as affordable options for new home buyers and seniors seeking to downsize alike, a pressure release valve for our entire housing market.<sup>xliiv</sup> In 1980 in America 40% of all homes built were single family starter homes, in 2019 the percentage stands at 7%. This precipitous decline is a stark example of our national “awe shucks, what can we do???” housing strategy - a glaring indictment of a government asleep at the wheel for decades.

Following the Great Recession we simply stopped building enough homes, of all types, and we as a state are feeling the compounding impacts. As shared in my recent report coauthored with Evelyn Lim, *From Conflict to Compassion a Colorado Housing Development Blueprint For Transformational Change*, Colorado has a housing shortage of 175,000 units, requiring no less than 54,000 new units developed annually for the next five years to close the gap.<sup>xliv</sup>

As such, housing that is affordable to most Coloradans is rare, and as a result, both the rental and ownership markets are experiencing rapid price escalations, bidding wars are the norm, evictions already a significant concern here in Colorado, suppressed by federal and state eviction moratoriums are poised to exceed Pre-COVID-19 levels following the expiration of the CDC eviction moratorium this past August. With more Coloradans experiencing the strain of housing burden, the impact reverberates throughout the entire housing continuum, presenting the greatest risk to our extremely low income Coloradans who have not the means financially to keep pace, and we have not the units required to house them. Additionally, the compounding weight we carry in our pursuit of stable, healthy, affordable housing extracts a tremendous toll on our mental health, and cannot be overstated. While our report focuses on the supply side root causes of our affordable housing shortage, we must also concurrently address much needed public health policy interventions that complement our investments in housing supply as they are synergistic in nature.

## How We Can Reduce Homelessness

Improving the current state of American homelessness, requires rectifying our failed American housing stability strategy. A soup to nuts, whole cloth evaluation of our housing stability policy framework, at the federal, state and local levels will illuminate the systemic fractures that leave American states and cities exposed to rapid increases in homelessness during times of crisis. While the cyclical nature of homelessness in America has existed for generations, Coloradans can take some solace in the fact that while yes, America has struggled with mass homelessness multiple times in our nation's history, we have mobilized, to meet the moment, with success, via national strategies to house our nation's citizens. When faced with

rapidly increasing homelessness, past American administrations have responded with bold, sweeping, federal policy interventions, directly focused on the large-scale creation of new affordable housing units, backed by abundant equity and low cost debt financing vehicles heavily subsidized by the Federal Government. The examples remain with us today, albeit in dire need of rebirth and modernization. Looking to our past to help inform the future provides a bright light of hope for us today. These past policies, and the level of funding allocated to support them did tremendous good. We can and should look to them for guidance, inspiration, as well as caution.

These previous policies and the vestiges of them today, provide a road map to help us seek a new direction forward. Let us look briefly at just a few of the major housing policy milestones of our past.<sup>xlvi</sup> All groundbreaking, all bold, all controversial, all requiring significant political capital to proceed, all ultimately impactful...

- 1933 FDR's The New Deal
- 1934 Federal Housing Administration created
- 1944 GI Bill Provides Mortgage Assistance to Veterans
- 1946 Congress Declares a National Housing Emergency
- 1965 Department of Housing and Urban Development created as part of LBJ "Great Society"
- 1968 Housing and Urban Development Act
- 1968 Fair Housing Act Passes
- 1974 Housing Choice Voucher Program created

While these policies accomplished tremendous results, they failed to serve all Americans at tremendous cost, both fiscally, culturally and morally. Moving forward, it is our obligation as Americans to correct the sins of past generations who systematically omitted people of color from the benefits of our national housing interventions as described above.<sup>xlvii</sup> It is vital that we Americans today understand that people of color were not allowed to benefit from the GI Bill, they were not allowed to purchase homes in desirable suburbs, surrounding good paying jobs, that were created with these federal stimulus packages by exclusionary race covenants, redlining policies of the real estate and mortgage industries. All of which prohibited people of color from purchasing homes in white neighborhoods and subsequently the benefits to them and their heirs from the wealth the highly subsidized home purchases generated. Righting these terrible wrongs will mitigate not only our current homelessness crisis, but will act as a future investment against the severity of future homelessness cycles to come.

The American Rescue Act - The Next "Great Society?"

As in years past, Congress and the President have mobilized to address the housing crisis impacting Americans. The American Rescue Act, passed into law in early 2021, has allocated significant funding to states and localities to jumpstart the development of affordable housing, rehouse those experiencing homelessness and modernize the policies and processes to accomplish this, but questions remain, will local homeowners and thus local elected officials embrace the tradeoffs required to harness the funding? <sup>xlviii</sup><sub>[OBJ]</sub>

At first glance, the ten billion dollars allocated towards affordable housing development, homelessness services and emergency housing vouchers allocated in the ARA presents optimism but significant headwinds remain. America, facing a five million and counting national housing supply shortage, has a decision to make. While the American Rescue Act funding is significant,<sup>xlix</sup> the reality is that our federal government can allocate all the gold in Fort Knox, offer world class technical assistance to local governments and mission minded affordable housing developers alike, but it will not correlate into the scale of new housing development required until local elected officials begin to say yes to more housing development, in increased locations throughout communities, with greater density and less parking. All are tradeoffs that have proven difficult for local elected officials to green light in the face of fierce community opposition, most frequently from local homeowners who desire the status quo when it comes to their neighborhood character.

Addressing the cultural undercurrents that influence local land use and planning methodologies that restrict available land for housing development, and the density required to address real estate market forces that dictate the price of land and construction is the ultimate challenge of our generation. It appears that the current administration is moving from acknowledgement of this omnipresent barrier, to action and it couldn't come soon enough.

On September 20th, 2021, the Biden Administration launched a new national initiative to combat American Homelessness. House America asks local leaders at the state, county and municipalities to pledge publicly their dedication to reducing homelessness, in return they will receive resources and technical support to develop affordable housing units.<sup>l</sup> The initiative's goal is to rehouse 100,000 homeless Americans and develop 20,000 affordable housing units over a three year period. The first cohort of 25 local and state leaders from major American cities struggling with affordable housing, and homelessness crises are encouraged to prioritize permanent supportive housing solutions as opposed to short term solutions such as congregate shelters or tiny home villages. Additionally, the administration is encouraging states and localities to tap into the broader \$350B in ARA funding not specifically earmarked for affordable housing to complement the aforementioned \$10B. If affordable housing truly is infrastructure, if affordable housing truly is healthcare, if affordable housing is truly a priority, then local



governments are empowered to designate it as such. We ask the question - will they?

## Conclusion

House America is on to something and should be celebrated. What it gets right is the focus on locally elected officials, at the municipality and county levels. These locally elected officials are the front-line leaders whose buy-in, makes or breaks housing projects, it's that simple, locally elected officials are the gatekeepers, their influence absolute. Elected officials, as patriots, must step forward and endorse the strategic importance of addressing our housing supply crisis, speaking openly, honestly and consistently to their home owning constituents about the current dire state of our affordable housing stock and its causation of rapidly increasing homelessness. While homeowners will certainly chafe at the prospect of new housing development in their communities, the status quo is no longer tenable, public sentiment is changing, with a majority of Coloradans stating that affordable housing is a problem that state and local officials should address.<sup>li</sup>

It is now time for our political response to echo this call to action and address the humanitarian crisis our housing shortage has created. Today, as in years past, once we Americans put our minds to accomplish something, we succeed. We created the largest manufacturing industry the world had ever seen to equip our brave men and women in WWII, liberating the world as a result. We then harnessed our significant resources and market power to pass legislation to build the housing our growing society required.

We can and will do it again - this time taking the necessary steps to house America, and unlike the last time, we must offer the American Dream to all Americans, regardless of the color of their skin. A comprehensive American Housing Stability Strategy, fueled by the already significant pot of federal COVID-19 stimulus funding, embraced and implemented by our local elected officials, with our communities' health and wellness as the guiding light will accomplish our obligation to house America. Until then we are simply waxing poetic and what a sour epic the bard currently spins.

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- <sup>ii</sup> Blair Miller & Benjamin Lloyd, "[Deep Dive: Governor Polis announces distribution of money from American Rescue Plan Act](#)." KOAA News5, June 7, 2021.
- <sup>iii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>iv</sup> G. Horcher, "Letter to Seattle Convention Leaders: Your Problem is Out of Control," Seattle, June 15, 2018. Letter to Seattle convention leaders: Your problem is out of control – KIRO 7 News Seattle
- <sup>v</sup> E.g. [Denver's Road Home hits a dead end \(denverpost.com\)](#) & <https://www.thedenverchannel.com/news/front-range/denver/ballpark-area-shop-owners-tired-of-cleaning-up-waste-vomit-needles-left-by-homeless-in-doorways>
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- <sup>vii</sup> <https://denver.cbslocal.com/2021/09/03/homeless-encampments-small-business/>
- <sup>viii</sup> <https://coloradosun.com/2021/09/27/homeless-water-restrooms-parks-opinion/>
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- <sup>x</sup> Finley, B. (March 4, 2021). "Fecal matter elevated in South Platte River as Denver fights state health agency over water pollution," *Denver Post*. <https://www.denverpost.com/2021/03/04/south-platte-river-ecoli-pollution/>
- <sup>xi</sup> UWRRC, 2014, [Pathogens in Urban Stormwater Systems - Environmental and Water Resources Institute \(ewrinstitute.org\)](#), p 146.
- <sup>xii</sup> UWRRC, 2014, [Pathogens in Urban Stormwater Systems - Environmental and Water Resources Institute \(ewrinstitute.org\)](#), p 162.
- <sup>xiii</sup> <https://mlf.org/community-first/>
- <sup>xiv</sup> ECHO, "[PIT 2021 v5.html.utf8 \(austinecho.org\)](#)", May 21, 2021.
- <sup>xv</sup> Megan Kimble, "[Austin's Fix for Homelessness: Tiny Houses, and Lots of Neighbors](#)", November 12, 2018.
- <sup>xvi</sup> [Austin, Texas Population 2021 \(Demographics, Maps, Graphs\) \(worldpopulationreview.com\)](#)
- <sup>xvii</sup> [Fact-check: Is Austin spending \\$20,000 per homeless person, as Abbott said? - News - Austin American-Statesman - Austin, TX](#)
- <sup>xviii</sup> [How to Apply for a Home - Mobile Loaves & Fishes \(mlf.org\)](#)
- <sup>xix</sup> [https://mlf.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2019-Annual-Report\\_P4.pdf](https://mlf.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2019-Annual-Report_P4.pdf)
- <sup>xx</sup> <https://boulderbridgehouse.org/ready-to-work/>
- <sup>xxi</sup> <https://boulderbridgehouse.org/ready-to-work/>
- <sup>xxii</sup> 2020 Annual Report; <https://boulderbridgehouse.org/about/annual-reports/>
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Bridge House. Ready to Work Overview Presentation. <https://boulderbridgehouse.org/ready-to-work/>. PowerPoint Presentation.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> <https://boulderbridgehouse.org/ready-to-work/>
- <sup>xxv</sup> Bridge-House-Ready-to-Work-Overview; <https://boulderbridgehouse.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Bridge-House-Ready-to-Work-Overview-NewBrand.pptx>
- <sup>xxvi</sup> 2020 Annual Report; <https://boulderbridgehouse.org/about/annual-reports/>
- <sup>xxvii</sup> <https://www.urbanpeak.org/>
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Urban Peak, 2020 Impact Report, <https://www.urbanpeak.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/2020.UrbanPeak.ImpactReport.pdf>, p.12

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