



# WE WILL REMEMBER 2019

## HOMELESS DEATH REVIEW | DENVER, CO

Each year, the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless (CCH) reports on the deaths of people experiencing homelessness living in Denver. It is both our humble duty to honor the lives of these individuals and our greatest responsibility to ensure that these deaths are memorialized in great detail to emphasize the magnitude to which homelessness contributes to the early, and often preventable, death of our neighbors.

According to the data available through a coordinated process involving Metro Denver Homeless Initiative (MDHI) which is comprised of thirteen local organizations dedicated to serving those in our community experiencing homelessness, at least 172 people experiencing homelessness passed away in metropolitan Denver, Colorado, in 2019. Names were collected for the unofficial total from MDHI partners from January 1, 2019 through December 13, 2019. No demographic or medical information was available for these individuals.

Analysis from Denver Medical Examiner's Office (OME) dated November 1, 2018 through November 30, 2019 is detailed in the data which follows for 120 of the people experiencing homelessness who passed away. Of those included in the Examiner's report, 11 were still pending a full medical report so no additional details were available at the time of this report for those cases. However, due to a change in the Denver Medical Examiner's Office's policies, the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless is no longer able to collect demographic data including age and gender about people who have died while experiencing homelessness. Additionally, the numbers from MDHI and the Denver Medical Examiner's Office could not be cross-referenced meaning this report cannot be used for an accurate total count of people who died while experiencing homelessness in Denver in 2019. Lastly, CCH was also unable to collect names from the OME of those who are now deceased to add to the We Will Remember: Homeless Persons' Memorial Vigil program, again challenging our ability to give an accurate count in 2019. We believe this information is key to understanding how people lived and died in



our community and in obtaining additional resources for targeted populations, but this year's report and its accompanying Vigil program do not include full data, details, and names of all individuals who passed away while experiencing homelessness.

We will remember all the people who have passed while experiencing homelessness along with the estimated 1,581 others who have died since 2008 (when the Coalition officially began tracking this information), as well as countless others in years prior, and those whose deaths have gone unreported. These individuals lived on the streets, under bridges, in cars, hospital beds, emergency rooms, shelters, and sometimes in nursing homes or transitional housing.

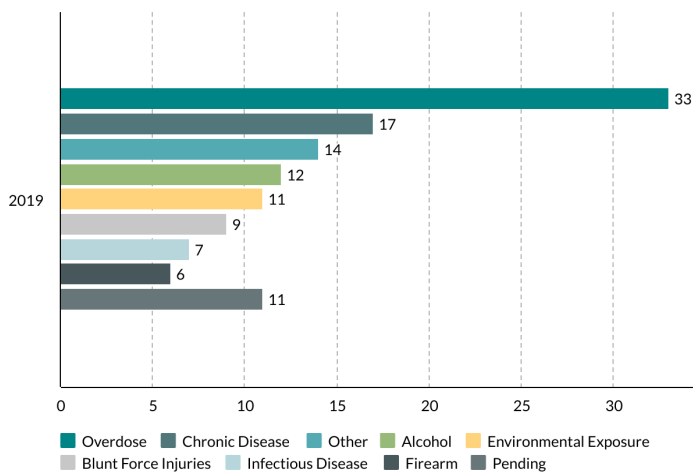
### Homelessness in Colorado

The 2019 MDHI Point-In-Time Survey counted 5,755 men, women, and children experiencing homelessness in the seven-county Metro Denver Area (3,943 of which are in the city and county of Denver alone), an increase of 438 people (8.2 percent) from 2018. Among those who participated in the Point-In-Time Survey, 691 were newly homeless, 429 identified as families (a total of 1402 people in these households), and 627 identified as veterans.<sup>1</sup> (Point-in-Time data can be limiting because it is collected in a single 24-hour period in January each

calendar year and only includes people experiencing homelessness as defined by the Department of Housing and Urban Development. It is the only count done nationally for comparison and analysis.) At the time of this report, the 2019 statewide Point-in-Time data has not yet been released.

## Top Causes of Death

Among the 109 confirmed causes of death reported by OME, drug overdose was the primary cause. In 2019, 33 people experiencing homelessness or thirty-one percent (31%) in Denver died from drug overdose of which nearly seventy percent (70%) were methamphetamine overdose or a combination of methamphetamine and other substances. Complications caused by chronic disease followed at nearly sixteen percent (16%) with hypertensive cardiovascular disease, and hypertensive and atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease (i.e. clogged arteries) as the most common diseases resulting in death. While not a leading cause, also of note is environmental exposure which took the lives of ten percent (10%) of the total 109 confirmed deaths. The highest proportion of deaths due to exposure occurred in January 2019, accounting for twenty-seven percent (27%) of all deaths that month.



*The Medical Examiner's office was able to confirm the primary cause of death for 109 of the 120 individuals who died while experiencing homelessness in 2019.*

## Methamphetamines

The current resurgence of methamphetamine use after the initial epidemic in the 1990s is killing Americans (housed and unhoused) at staggering rates. Nationwide, the number of drug overdose deaths involving methamphetamine increased nearly four-fold from 1,887 deaths in 2011 to 6,762 deaths in 2016.<sup>2</sup> This twenty-nine percent (29%) per year increase nationally<sup>3</sup> is mirrored locally for people experiencing homelessness.

This shocking data causes concern for the future of methamphetamine users in communities across the nation. Not only are there no FDA-approved medications to counteract the side effects associated with methamphetamine, reduce its addiction potential, or help recovering users to maintain abstinence for methamphetamine,<sup>4</sup> but the only effective treatments for methamphetamine require 30 to 60-day detox treatment, 30 days of intensive inpatient therapy, followed by outpatient behavioral therapy totaling \$15,000 to \$27,000 an episode.<sup>5</sup>

Fentanyl, a synthetic opioid which is increasingly life-threatening when combined with other substances, is appearing in methamphetamine more frequently. A study published by the American Medical Association found that between January 2013 and September 2018, the presence of fentanyl in urine drug tests that were also positive for methamphetamine rose seven hundred ninety-eight percent (798%).<sup>6</sup> Without swift action to create recovery plans and medication-assisted treatment for methamphetamines, deaths from methamphetamine overdose will continue to rise in our community.

## Chronic Disease

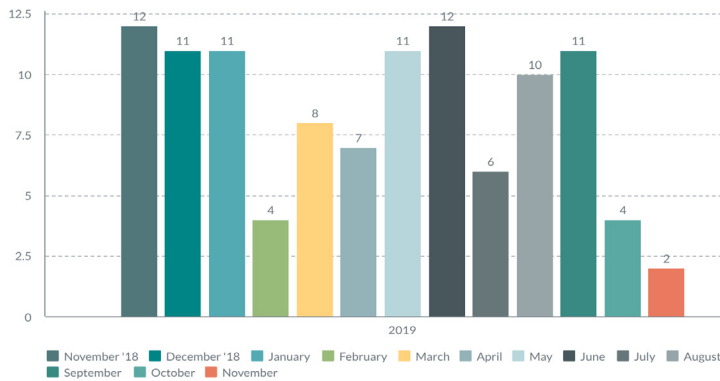
Chronic diseases are responsible for seven out of every 10 deaths in the United States (and Colorado specifically), killing more than 1.7 million Americans every year.<sup>7</sup> While people in this report died at a much lower rate from chronic disease than the national average, it is important to note that the average life expectancy of a person experiencing homelessness is lower than a housed person. A person experiencing homelessness is estimated to die between 42 and 52 years of age compared to 78 years of age in the general housed population.<sup>8</sup> For people who are housed, at 67, an individual with heart disease is [still] estimated to live an additional 21.2 years on average.<sup>9</sup> This suggests that a person experiencing homelessness may succumb to their chronic illness if they had the opportunity to experience the life expectancy of their housed counterparts.

Chronic disease is often preventable and treatable. However, for unhoused populations, lack of access to medical care, healthy food, sanitary conditions, proper medication storage, and a safe place to rest and recover challenges a person's ability to properly prevent and treat chronic disease.

## Environmental Exposure

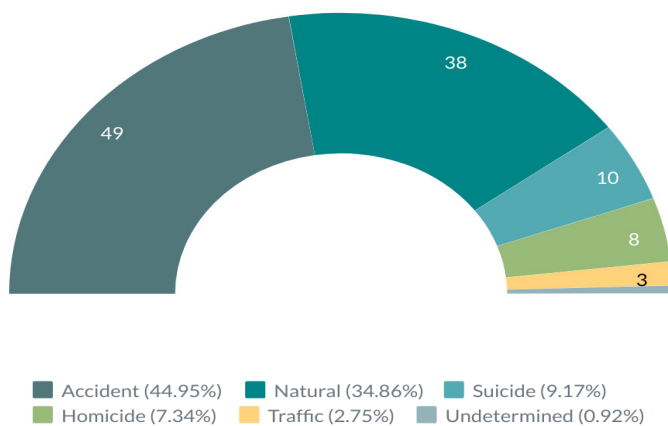
Between November 2018 and November 2019, ten

percent (10%) of deaths were related to environmental exposure, the majority of which were from hypothermia or complications due to illness in combination with exposure to cold environments.



The most deaths occurred in the months of November 2018 and June 2019, accounting for 12 deaths each.

With little opportunity to retreat from freezing temperatures and gusty winds, environmental exposure is deadly for people experiencing homelessness. Hypothermia can be fatal when a person’s core body temperature falls below 95 degrees Fahrenheit which can occur in temperatures at approximately 50 degrees. Denver’s average temperatures fell below 50 degrees for seven months in 2018.<sup>10</sup> People who die from hypothermia experience extreme shivering, slow and shallow breathing, confusion and memory loss, exhaustion, slurred speech, loss of coordination, weak pulse, unconsciousness, and ultimately will die if unable to retreat to a place to warm their body’s core temperature. Death by hypothermia is tragic and entirely preventable.



The Medical Examiner’s Office was able to determine the manner of death for 109 out of the 120 individuals who died while experiencing homelessness. Between November 1, 2018 and November 30, 2019 Nearly 45 percent (45%) of deaths were accidental.

## Housing Saves Lives

For the first time in the Homeless Death Review, the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless compared deaths among people at-risk or formerly experiencing homelessness in housing at the time of death (37 people) to people who the Office of the Medical Examiner confirmed were actively experiencing homelessness at the time of death (109 people). Using statistical methods, the Coalition found that housing has a significant effect on the manner and cause of death. Roughly forty-five percent (45%) of deaths among people experiencing homelessness were accidental, making it the leading manner of death in that population. Comparatively, accidental deaths accounted for only nine percent (9%) of deaths among people formerly experiencing homelessness or at-risk of homelessness.

Similarly, while overdose was the leading cause of death among people experiencing homelessness, overdose was the cause of only three percent (3%) of deaths among people formerly experiencing homelessness or at-risk of homelessness. Housing changes the outcomes of people formerly experiencing homelessness dramatically, leading to fewer accidental deaths and far less death by overdose.

## What We Can Do

Housing is unequivocally the solution to homelessness. It is also key to preventing the tragic deaths of our neighbors experiencing homelessness, connecting those who need it with the resources to recover from substance use disorders, and providing the opportunity to prevent and treat chronic illness. With housing, people are able to live longer, healthier lives.

In December 2019, the City of Denver invested \$6.89 million for bridge housing vouchers, expanded day shelter access, shelter improvements, and enhanced onsite services to connect people experiencing homelessness to permanent housing. This is a step in the right direction to help the nearly 4,000 men, women, and children experiencing homelessness in the city and county of Denver. We need to continue to increase these investments to ensure that all people experiencing homelessness are able to safe, secure shelter and affordable housing.

We are encouraged that the state of Colorado allocated significant financial resources to housing through House Bills 1245 and 1322 though we will not see the impact of those new funds for many years to come. HB19-1245 made changes to Colorado’s vendor fee to generate up to \$50 million per year for affordable housing. The savings

will be transferred to the Housing Development Grant Fund within the Department of Local Affairs and will be used to improve, preserve, and expand the supply of affordable housing in Colorado. HB19-1322 established a new state fund to support programs and projects that improve, preserve, and expand the supply of affordable housing in Colorado. However, a transfer of funds will not occur in Fiscal Year 2020 as anticipated due to state tax policy challenges. While the 2019 legislative session was a historic year for housing funding legislation, we must continue to encourage federal, state, and local governments to invest in housing and shelter opportunities for people experiencing homelessness.

As evidenced by the national response to the opioid epidemic, we know it is possible to prevent substance use overdose for many people. Medication assisted treatment, clean needle exchanges, Naloxone, and Safe Use Sites all help to fight the opioid epidemic head on. In 2018, 974 people died of a drug overdose in Colorado, down from the state's record of 1,012 deaths in 2017, according to data from the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment. It is the first year over-

dose deaths have decreased since 2012.<sup>11</sup> The decrease is largely due to a drop in prescription opioid overdoses. We must address methamphetamine overdose deaths with the same rigor and multi-pronged approach that has shown progress in combating the opioid epidemic to stop methamphetamine overdose devastation throughout the state.

The Colorado Coalition for the Homeless hosts the We Will Remember: Homeless Persons' Memorial Vigil on the shortest day each year to honor and remember those who have died while experiencing homelessness. This marks the 30th year of honoring those lives lost. We encourage the community to come together to solve homelessness to prevent the heartbreaking end of life of our loved ones, colleagues, friends, and neighbors.



## Resources

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- 8 National Coalition for the Homeless. Health Care and Homelessness. 2009 July. <https://www.nationalhomeless.org/factsheets/health.html>
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- 10 National Weather Service. 2018. Denver's 2018 Climate Year in Review. [https://www.weather.gov/bou/Denver\\_2018\\_climate\\_summary](https://www.weather.gov/bou/Denver_2018_climate_summary)
- 11 Julig, Carina. The Denver Post. 10 June 2019. Colorado Overdose Deaths Fall for First Time Since 2012. <https://www.denverpost.com/2019/06/10/colorado-overdose-deaths-fall/>



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