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Colorado Coalition for the Homeless Calls on Denver Mayor and Colorado Governor to Stop Sweeps and Address Homelessness

DENVER, CO-- On Wednesday, July 30 Colorado Coalition for the Homeless (CCH) sent a [letter](#) to Denver Mayor Michael Hancock and Colorado Governor Jared Polis condemning the recent eviction of individuals experiencing homelessness camping in Civic Center Park in Denver. Below is the full letter sent to the mayor's and governor's offices.

The Colorado Coalition for the Homeless (CCH) advocates for lasting solutions to homelessness as well as honoring the inherent dignity of all community members, including our unhoused neighbors. We strongly condemn the City's choice to evict those living in Civic Center Park without an adequate plan in place to address the needs of the people forced to living without housing in the area. We also strongly condemn Governor Polis' support of this, both in words and contribution of state troopers to this appalling destruction of people's temporary "homes".

We applaud the Mayor's recent approval of siting Safe Outdoor Spaces for those unable to access shelter, and the endorsement of a ballot measure to bring in much needed revenue for homelessness housing and services and we appreciate our continued partnership with your office and the Department of Housing Stability (HOST). However, CCH has routinely disagreed with enforcement actions that simply "move people along" during normal times and the use of this harmful tactic during a global pandemic is short-sighted and cruel.

The Governor seems to believe that ignoring homelessness and the housing crisis in Colorado will somehow make it go away. We know that our community cannot simply wish homelessness away. The Governor needs to take this issue seriously and devote significant resources to address before complaining about people living near the capitol. Calling in the State Patrol to remove people from their temporary homes is not only disruptive but it further deepens distrust between law enforcement and our unhoused neighbors at time when we need to be bringing people together and strengthening communities.

"Sweeps" of encampments, where our unhoused neighbors are living, are in conflict with CDC guidelines. The [CDC states](#), "clearing encampments can cause people to disperse throughout the community and break connections with service providers. This increases the potential for infectious disease spread." This disruption of lives and living situations not only increases potential to spread the coronavirus, but also breaks trust with the community. Those individuals and families living outside are now less likely to trust service providers who are trying to connect people with resources, healthcare, and housing. Additionally, the risk of contracting and spreading COVID-19 is greater to their community and the surrounding communities they are being displaced to. In a recent [report](#) that CCH released, the prevalence rate among unsheltered people living in downtown encampments was just 3%, much lower than the prevalence rate that we are seeing in the general population (~5%) and in the shelters and transitional housing (~11%). Prior [testing](#) showed 0% prevalence rates among unsheltered people experiencing homelessness. Dispersing people from encampments puts them in harms way and increases the opportunity for them to become exposed to COVID-19.

We understand that our elected leaders are often faced with difficult choices and are required to balance the challenging realities of limited resources and competing interests. Unfortunately, the voices of businesses and

neighbors have privileged access to those in power, and the voices of those considered “the least of us” are most often overlooked and ignored. There is likely no way to satisfy all of these interests without a significant commitment by the City and the State to create real solutions to the tragedy of growing homelessness. We also recognize that public health and safety concerns arise in encampment areas but we think the City and the State could use approaches like outreach, services, and support rather than using the most punitive and disruptive tactic of completely removing an encampment with law enforcement.

CCH’s philosophy of service includes advocating for social and racial equity, inclusion, and diversity, to this end we acknowledge that homelessness and subsequent “sweeps” disproportionately affect our Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) neighbors. The [2020 Point-In-Time survey](#) led by Metro Denver Homeless Initiative (MDHI), shows that the BIPOC community experiences homelessness at disproportionate rates to the general population. Every racialized group shows three to five times their representation in the homelessness population compared to their representation overall.² This demonstrates how systemic racism continues to negatively impact members of our Black, Indigenous and communities of color and how the actions your governments are taking perpetuate racist systems and impacts.

We call on the City and the State to take new and creative action to provide lasting solutions to homelessness. Rather than spending thousands of dollars to remove people from their current living situation, just to set up their tent nearby and lose community and provider connections, the City and State should reallocate those funds to provide permanent housing solutions. These should be in the form of increased housing vouchers, increased development of subsidized housing, and increased funding for supportive services. We also call on the Governor to extend the eviction moratorium to protect those impacted by COVID-19 or reallocate resources to fund rental assistance to prevent a new tsunami of homelessness in our state. As the economic crisis related to COVID-19 stretches on, and the Federal eviction moratorium and unemployment benefits are not renewed, we know that we face a disaster of increased evictions, homelessness, and erosion of our community. We ask that you act today with compassion, understanding, and respect for every community member.

CCH stands ready to work with the Mayor and the Governor to address the crisis of homelessness and to provide meaningful and lasting solutions for our unhoused community.

About the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless

The mission of the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless is to work collaboratively toward the prevention of homelessness and the creation of lasting solutions for people experiencing and at-risk of homelessness throughout Colorado. The Coalition advocates for and provides a continuum of housing and a variety of services to improve the health, well-being and stability of those it serves. Since its founding more than 30 years ago, the organization has earned state and national recognition for its integrated healthcare, housing, and service programs. The Coalition’s comprehensive approach addresses the causes of homelessness, as well as the consequences, offering critical assistance to over 20,000 individuals and families each year. Learn more at www.coloradocoalition.org.

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