

September 21, 2020

To the Voters of Denver:

We write to you as frontline health care providers and stewards of public health with serious concerns regarding the health and well-being of Colorado's unhoused community especially during this COVID-19 pandemic.

Living without secure housing is a potent determinant of individual health. According to the most recent 2019 Colorado Health Access Survey, 44% of Coloradans with unstable housing report poor health versus 12% of those who are stably housed. As frontline health care providers, we witness firsthand the detrimental impact that lack of housing has on the health of our patients, whose medical care is routinely compromised by restricted access to resources and exposure to serious environmental hazards.

While Colorado has grappled with overcoming homelessness for some time, this crisis has escalated in the wake of economic hardships spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic. Early in 2020, Colorado had already experienced a steady increase in number of its unhoused citizens—especially those using emergency shelters and those living unsheltered. Importantly, these estimates do not account for the impact of our state's record-setting rates of unemployment in recent months, resulting in a concerning rise in evictions. Just last month, Colorado Public Radio reported that one in 10 Coloradans are out of work. Without substantial government action on eviction policies, unemployment, or other income replacement, Colorado, like the rest of the nation, risks a catastrophic increase of homelessness by as much as 40-50%.

People experiencing homelessness are often medically vulnerable individuals with pre-existing medical conditions and advancing age, and international data clearly show these groups to be more vulnerable to severe COVID-19 disease. To date, 602 of our unhoused neighbors have tested positive for COVID-19 in Denver. Of the 580 with a completed case investigation, 123 (21%) required hospitalization; 22 individuals have required intensive care, and at least 13 have died. These risks weigh most heavily on Black and Latinx Coloradans who are overrepresented among people experiencing homelessness.

Nationally and within Colorado, shelters have become hotspots for COVID-19 transmission. The CDC has reported infection rates as high as 11 times the baseline rate in overburdened locations in several U.S. cities. According to Public Health data, positivity rates in congregate shelters average 9% versus 3% in outdoor encampments.

Hospitalized patients who are unhoused face substantial obstacles to a medically advisable discharge, particularly amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The dire shortage of housing and appropriate resources to meet the needs of these medically fragile unhoused individuals encumbers our hospitals, contributing to excess length of stay, increased morbidity and costs. It also limits access for other patients with acute care needs in our community. Many unhoused patients who return directly to Denver's streets risk rapid worsening of their condition, re-hospitalization, and sometimes death.

While Denver has taken initial steps to de-concentrate shelters, the city's shelter capacity is down approximately 1,200 beds and the extra capacity established through emergency funds will soon come to an end. Therefore, we must act quickly to afford our unhoused neighbors the opportunity to safely shelter in place by expanding both immediate and long-term housing options. Denver has already shown itself to be an innovator in this regard—through its Social Impact Bond and other investments in housing—and will be looked to as a leader by other communities across the nation.

Dedicated, large-scale funding to support infrastructure for housing and appropriate supportive services is critical to address the current crisis, and also offers an opportunity for lasting, meaningful change. **We urge voters to support Measure 2B, the proposed 0.25% sales tax increase for the Homelessness Resolution Fund to support housing, shelter, and supportive services for those experiencing or exiting homelessness.**

We cannot address public health without addressing homelessness. As health care providers serving on the frontline of the COVID-19 pandemic, we stand ready to collaborate with our Denver community in a truly unprecedented time.

The views expressed in this letter are the personal views of a community of frontline healthcare providers in Denver and do not necessarily represent the views of any particular organization.