

DENVER JOINT TASK FORCE

Live Updates on COVID-19 Planning and Response for Persons
Experiencing Homelessness from the Denver Joint Task Force

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*Co-authored by Sarah Stella, MD, Kaylanne Chandler, RN, BSN
on behalf of the Denver Joint Task Force*

A grayscale photograph of a person wearing full personal protective equipment (PPE), including a headband, face shield, N95 mask, and gloves. They are wearing a dark jacket with a circular logo on the chest and are focused on handling a large, clear plastic bag. The background is out of focus, showing what appears to be a tent or temporary structure.

Overview

Recognizing the vulnerability of persons experiencing homelessness (PEH) to COVID-19, and the need for a swift, coordinated strategic response to limit COVID-19 transmission and to improve health outcomes in Denver's unhoused community, while preserving vital hospital capacity, we assembled the Denver Joint Task Force (DJTF).

The Denver Joint Task Force is comprised of interdisciplinary leaders of the following organizations:

- Colorado Coalition for the Homeless (CCH)
- Denver Department of Public Health and Environment (DDPHE)
- Denver Health (DH)
- Denver Human Services (DHS)
- Denver Public Health (DPH)
- Denver Department of Housing Stability (HOST)
- Denver Homeless Leadership Council (HLC)
- Metro Denver Homeless Initiative (MDHI)

To date, at least 619 unhoused individuals have been diagnosed with COVID-19 in the City and County of Denver. Of the 597 with completed case investigations, 125 (21%) have required hospitalization. At least 23 of these have required ICU care and at least 13 have died.

Since March 2020, the DJTF has collaborated to plan and implement strategic recommendations, review and respond to real-time epidemiologic data, address logistical challenges, and to advocate for the needs of PEH in order to optimize health outcomes and promote equity in the response to COVID-19. Highlights of this work include:

1) Reduced Overcrowding in Shelters to Reduce Transmission of COVID-19

HOST created two 24-hour auxiliary shelters to serve approximately 765 men and 300 women at the National Western Complex and Denver Coliseum. This increased current shelter capacity, allowed for improved adherence with physical distancing recommendations in current and new shelter space, and allowed PEH a safe place to rest day and night.

2) Outreach, Education, and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to Shelters and Encampments

DDPHE and CCH provided tailored educational materials on COVID-19 for PEH, and training and support for shelter staff on masking, hygiene and physical distancing to reduce transmission. DJTF also provided technical assistance on ventilation and filtration systems for the shelter systems. Additionally, PPE including masks and gloves, hand sanitizer, and other supplies were distributed to shelters and encampments throughout Denver.

3) Enhanced Clinical Support for Congregate Shelters

Provision of enhanced clinical support including creation of a Stout Street Health Center (SSHC) pop-up clinic at the National Western staffed by

CCH, early implementation of screening guidelines for shelters, and creation of a 24/7 telephone nurse advice line to provide additional support for homeless service providers and a safe and efficient city-wide pathway for testing, triage, and isolation of PEH with symptoms of COVID. To date, we have screened and triaged over 2,600 PEH experiencing COVID-19 symptoms on entrance to shelters and triaged over 8,500 COVID-related phone calls to the nurse advice line.

4) Creation of Safe Isolation Options for Unhoused Persons with Confirmed or Suspected COVID-19

At the height of COVID spread, 350 “Activated Respite” (AR) motel/hotel units were created to provide safe places for COVID+ PEH identified in healthcare facilities, shelters, and encampments to isolate and recover. Early on in the response, this team highlighted the critical element of data sharing and MDHI implemented processes to ensure COVID+ results were shared among the HLC and CCH and that clients were immediately referred to AR. As of October 3, 2020, 1197 individuals have been isolated and have received tailored, on-site supportive services including integrated health by CCH, and additional services provided by HOST, DHS, and The Salvation Army. DHS trained over 160 staff and volunteers to provide 24/7 operations over the course of four months at the AR and “Protective Action” hotels, along with support from the Colorado National Guard. The Salvation Army has since stepped in to carry forward the operations with longer term sustainability. In addition to providing a safe place for unhoused individuals to rest and recover, this resource has been critical to preserving hospital capacity in Denver.



5) Creation of “Protective Action” Rooms for Vulnerable Unhoused Individuals

We created 810 Protective Action (PA) hotel/motel

rooms to protect vulnerable individuals at high risk for severe COVID-19 complications based on age and co-morbidities. As of October 3, 2020, 1057 of the most vulnerable unhoused individuals from shelters and encampments have been temporarily housed and offered integrated health care services through this mechanism. This not only protected those at high risk but also helped to reduce over-crowding and limit the spread of COVID in shelters and encampments. Clients in large encampments were specifically outreached and screened and triaged into this COVID-19 resource.

6) Implementation of a Universal Testing Program for Shelters and Encampments

In response to confirmed cluster outbreaks in several shelters, and subsequent CDC guidance recommending universal testing for residents and staff in congregate settings, we conducted pilot surveillance testing in a residents of a Denver day shelter to assess feasibility of expanded testing and obtain preliminary epidemiologic data to guide further resource planning for outbreak prevention and control. Additionally, an initial pilot testing at a downtown Denver encampment was completed with 0% prevalence rate which led to additional encampment testing efforts. This work led to the creation of Denver's overall universal testing approach for PEH and staff in shelters and encampments.



As of August 31, 2020, DPH has tested 1,453 individuals experiencing homelessness including 1,191 individuals in shelters and 262 individuals in outdoor encampments. Overall, 67 individuals tested positive for COVID-19 representing 5% of those tested. An additional 334 PEH were tested for COVID-19 antibodies with 56 individuals (17%) testing positive. To date, public health partners (DPH and DDPHE) we have now tested over 3,571 PEH

and 733 staff in congregate settings throughout Denver with PCR tests. CCH continues to test symptomatic individuals currently experiencing homelessness and at-risk of becoming homeless because of current income. To date, CCH has tested 1,621 symptomatic individuals with 1,363 negative results and 251 positive results.



7) Ongoing Advocacy for Funding and Support for the Unhoused Community

The City of Denver has utilized \$1.5 million dollars in Federal COVID-19 Relief dollars and \$3 million in local funds to support a collaborative strategy dedicated to COVID-19 response. Through six collaborating local service providers, this 2020-2021 funding is dedicated to long-term rehousing solutions and supportive services for people experiencing homelessness. This coalition, called the "Denver Rehousing Collaborative", will create a comprehensive interdisciplinary process that matches individuals' and families' housing or service needs to participating support resources in the city. The Collaborative will primarily target individuals and families currently residing in Protective Action and Activated Respite hotel rooms but will accept other appropriate referrals. This identification approach, designed to stratify individuals and families into well-defined risk groups, will utilize existing data and frameworks developed by a multidisciplinary teams, including housing providers, behavioral health providers, and physicians. With this initial funding, the Collaborative seeks to successfully serve 200 individuals by December 2021 and craft a strategic plan for future opportunities and programmatic needs.

Emerging data suggests that Denver's homeless population has grown substantially since the pandemic began. This places even more strain on existing resources. Since Funding for temporary housing, sheltering and other COVID-related activities in PEH are supported by FEMA through the CARES act, we are advocating for large-scale intermediate and long-term funding sources to support re-housing efforts.

Acknowledgments:

We would like to acknowledge the following partners who were instrumental in the Denver COVID-19 Planning and Response for Persons Experiencing Homelessness:

- The National Guard, who provided the initial 24/7 staffing that allowed for the opening of additional axillary shelters and Activated Respite and Protective Action hotels
- Shelter Leadership, and especially members of the Homeless Leadership Collaborative , who coordinated shelter testing events and follow up
- Volunteers who supported shelter and encampment testing events.

