

Denver Board of Public Health & Environment

101 W. Colfax Ave, Suite 800

Denver, CO 80202

August 12, 2021

Dear Board Members:

It was brought to our attention that you have asked for more information about the City's public health response in persons experiencing homelessness (PEH), particularly among those who are living unsheltered and/or medically vulnerable. As physicians who provide medical care for PEH and who have been closely involved with the COVID-19 public health response—including testing, vaccine distribution and medical care for PEH alongside many community partners, we offer the following suggestions to improve the health and safety of PEH in Denver.

To create a safer and cleaner Denver now, a robust program for providing public trash containers with regular pick-ups is desperately needed. Similarly, access to public restrooms, more public sharps disposal containers, and handwashing stations would greatly benefit PEH and the community at large. We believe that this would be a positive first step in addressing the main sanitation concerns that exist around encampments.

In the event that PEH must be moved from an outdoor sleeping area, we encourage the city to commit to **planning and working with PEH and service providers well in advance of a planned displacement**. We believe this is needed to prepare individuals for moving in a way that does not result in lost belongings that are needed for survival (i.e., medications, sleeping bags, and tents), displacement from critical outreach services, increased vulnerability to violence or extreme temperatures, and/or mental and emotional trauma. We believe that a thoughtful, coordinated program should include regular publicly available reports on activities and outcomes in this regard. While social services support is not a substitute for permanent housing, which is the most effective means to improving public health and individual health outcomes, **regular engagement with social workers, peer support, and case managers trained in trauma-informed care, irrespective of the timing of displacement of persons in encampments would be a helpful intermediate step.**

Indoor shelters are not a realistic option for many of our patients. For some individuals, the safe outdoor space model is a feasible option, yet these sites serve only a small fraction of those in need. We encourage rapid and substantial expansion of this model to fit the need, extension of permitting for these sites beyond the pandemic, and extension of time limits if a suitable site is available.

Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have questions or would like to discuss our recommendations.

Sincerely,

Sarah E. Rowan, MD

Sarah Stella, MD

Ed Farrell, MD