

Department of Housing Stability

# COVID-19 Response Report

March 2021



**DENVER**  
HOUSING STABILITY

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# Introduction

On March 12, 2020, the City and County of Denver declared a State of Emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Emergency Operations Center (EOC) was activated and began operations the very next day. The Department of Housing Stability (HOST) worked in close collaboration with public health officials and the Denver Department of Public Health and Environment, as well as the Homeless Leadership Council, helping advise us on how to best keep shelter environments safe. From the beginning, the HOST leapt into action to collaborate with partners and deploy resources to ensure the safety of Denver's most vulnerable residents.

The value of our collaborative approach was keenly demonstrated in our collective response to COVID-19. Due to social distancing requirements, shelter capacity was cut by more than half. Fortunately, HOST had already recognized the need for a 24/7 shelter system through existing strategy documents, but the need for this type of shelter was critical to limit exposure and community spread of COVID-19. Out of necessity, the timeline for implementation of residential shelter was cut from years to six weeks, and existing shelters were converted to 24/7 operations with expanded services. Work continues to transform an emergency shelter system into a rehousing system.

Throughout March and April, HOST, city agencies such as Denver Human Services, and other community service partners took key steps to provide isolation opportunities for those in need, and congregate shelter with services to serve those experiencing homelessness:

- By March 17, 2020, HOST partnered with Volunteers of America to open the first "Activated Respite" hotel rooms for individuals experiencing homelessness who were COVID positive. Facilities expanded in partnership with the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless over coming weeks and months.
- On March 21, Colorado Coalition for the Homeless opened the first "Protective Action" hotel rooms for high risk individuals experiencing homelessness. Protective Action hotel rooms are now the majority of rooms provided for isolation and operate in partnership with the Coalition and The Salvation Army.
- On March 27, the Sheltering Section was established within the EOC with HOST and Denver Human Services staff to focus and align sheltering efforts.
- On April 9, the City and Denver Rescue Mission opened the National Western Complex as 24/7 emergency shelter for men experiencing homelessness. Colorado Coalition for the Homeless provided medical triage support at both of the large congregate shelters opened in April.
- On April 20, the City, Catholic Charities, The Delores Project, and the Gathering Place opened the Denver Coliseum for women and transgender individuals experiencing homelessness.

These and other partnerships were vital to ensuring vulnerable residents had access to safe and healthy sheltering options during the pandemic. Partnerships and collaboration both internally between city agencies and with external organizations, businesses, and community groups enabled HOST to create programs, services, and projects to serve residents along the housing spectrum.

As of March 18, 2021, Denver has paid \$109,237,421 on COVID-19 emergency response, with more than \$56.3 million of that to support emergency shelter services and supplies.

As the city faced the impacts of COVID – including job losses and compounding economic strain – more Denver residents faced housing instability and needed financial support. The Temporary Rental and Utility Assistance (TRUA) program provided 2,500 households with funds in 2020 to help cover residents' rent and utility bill payments, thus keeping people in their homes and with utilities – this represents a 150 percent increase over 2019. Demand for rent and utility support has continued to increase throughout the pandemic, spiking again by more than 60 percent in January 2021 over the month prior. HOST also funded the Eviction Legal Assistance Program, which provided free legal assistance to 558 households, including legal advice and in-court eviction representation. HOST anticipates the need for TRUA funding, eviction assistance, landlord tenant counseling, and mortgage assistance may continue to grow in 2021.

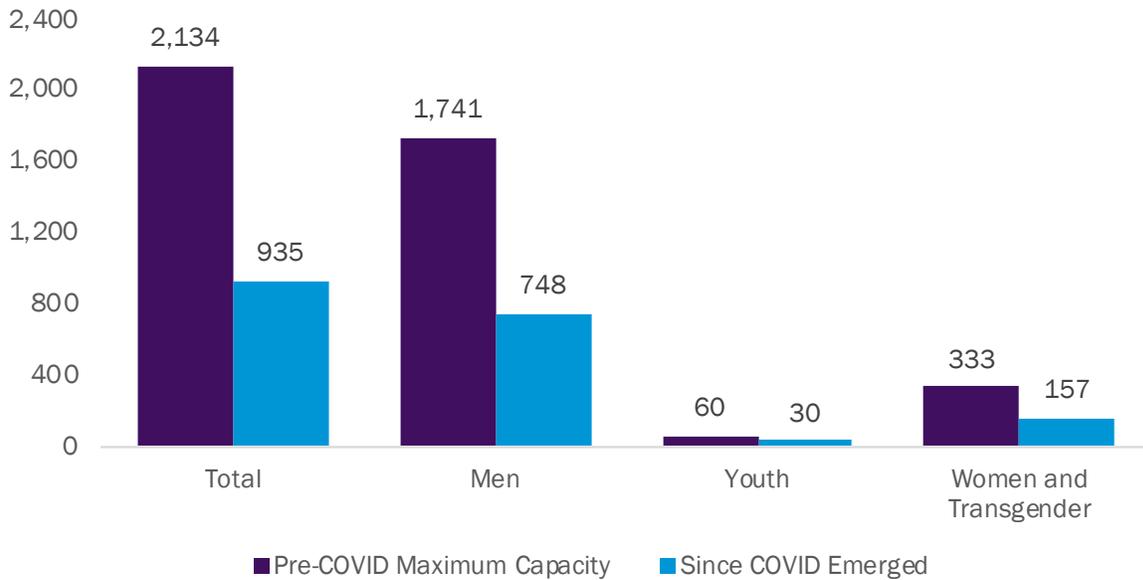
Denver is helping meet this unprecedented need through new program funds totaling nearly \$22 million from the U.S. Department of Treasury, as well as more than \$13 million in other federal and local funds that have been dedicated since March 2020. Additional resources may support these efforts as available.

This report documents the services and supports HOST has provided to assist people with staying in their homes, to provide temporary shelter, and to resolve homelessness during the year since the COVID-19 pandemic began in Denver.

# Sheltering Response

The effect of COVID-19 on the city has been overwhelming, especially for people with the fewest resources. People experiencing homelessness who contract the virus may be at higher risk for complications due to age and underlying health conditions, and face additional challenges isolating while residing in congregate shelter settings. COVID-19 also impacted shelters' capacity to serve persons experiencing homelessness with distancing requirements that reduced shelter capacity by more than 50% from 2,135 beds pre-COVID-19 to 935 beds at the start of the pandemic.

**Figure 1. Change in Maximum Shelter Capacity Pre-COVID and Since COVID Emerged**

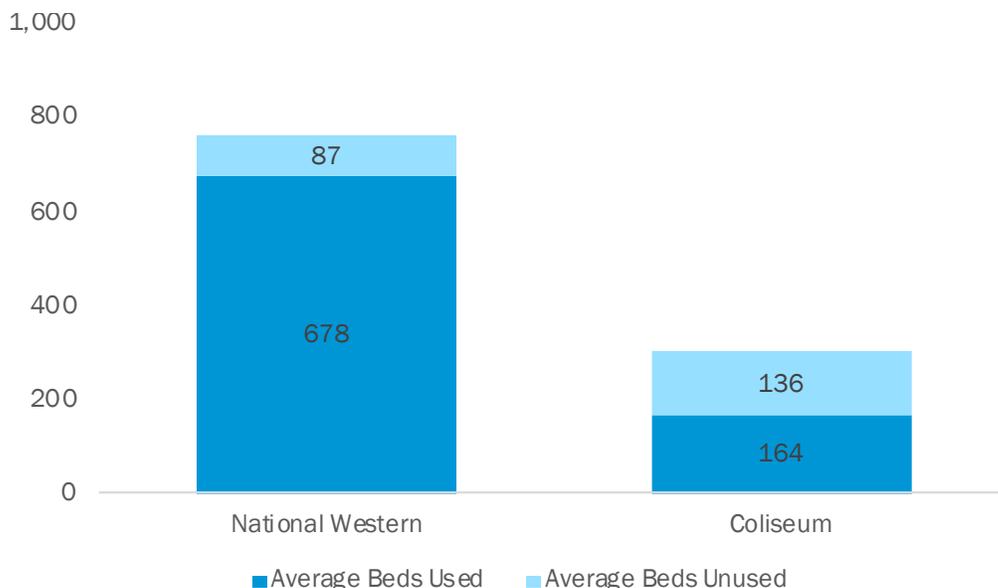


Note: Pre-COVID maximum capacities reflect capacities that could be achieved during an emergency (e.g., winter storm); this is more beds than are typically available on a given night.

## Re-building Shelter Capacity

Hotel and motel rooms (non-congregate shelters) were made available in March and April 2020 for high-risk individuals and/or those who were medically referred for isolation.

**Figure 2. Capacity Created at National Western Center with Average Nightly Use, April - July**



# Sheltering Response (cont.)

Additionally, two congregate shelters were established in April to de-densify and provide relief for existing shelters and appropriate distancing, bringing the sheltering system closer to the total available beds pre-COVID-19. These two congregate shelter sites, the National Western Complex and the Denver Coliseum, provided capacity for 1,065 beds between April and August 2020. The National Western Complex, transitioned back to its market use as an event facility as of August 2020 and is no longer utilized as a shelter. The Denver Coliseum, which alone provides 300 regular beds with additional overflow capacity if needed, continues use as shelter though it currently serves men experiencing homelessness.

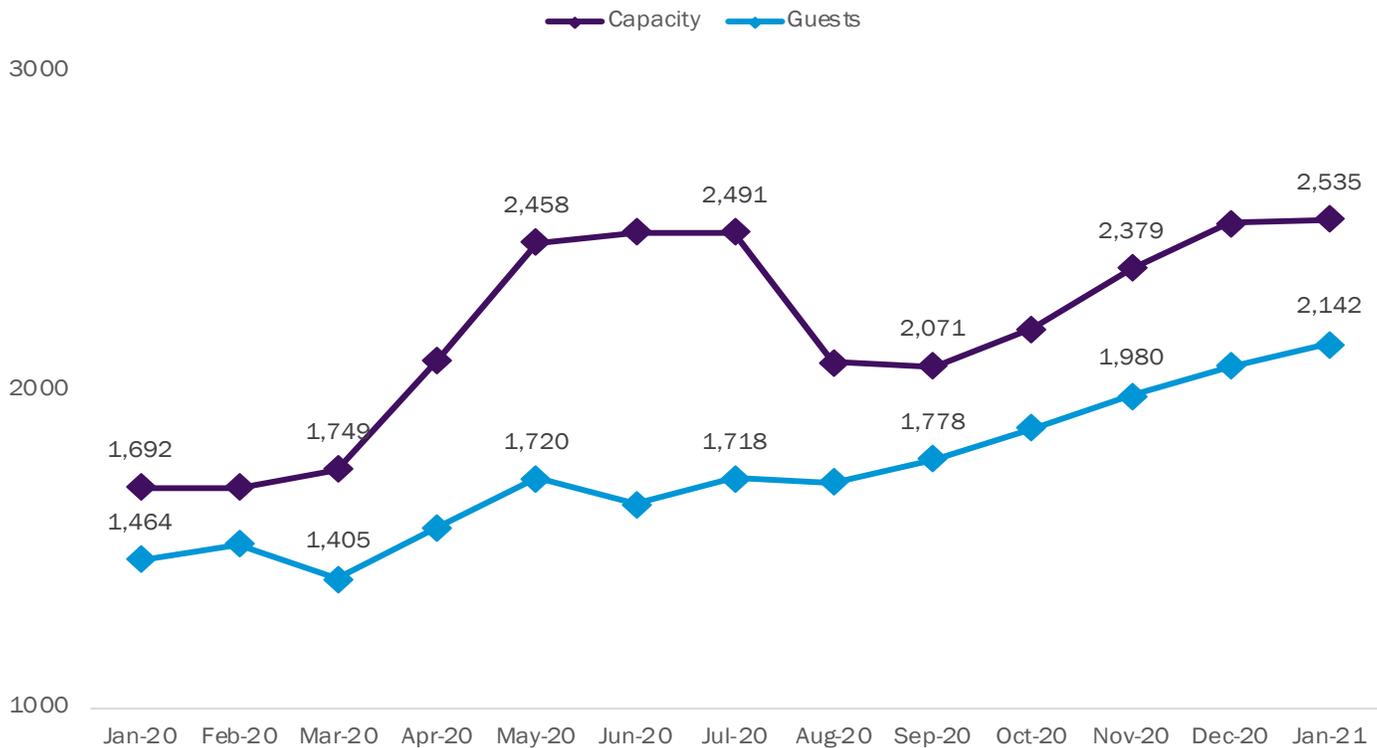
## Limiting Spread of COVID-19

Isolation provided through non-congregate and congregate emergency shelters has provided a strong foundation for limiting the spread of COVID-19 among the population of persons experiencing homelessness and the Denver community at large. Currently, Denver has approximately 710 Protective Action rooms for those experiencing homelessness who are considered at high-risk if they contract COVID-19. The city also has used hotels to expand sheltering options and address capacity needs, providing space for 269 guests per night in shelter alternative rooms and 192 guests per night in activated respite rooms for those who have tested positive for COVID-19. More than 3,000 unique individuals have been sheltered in hotel rooms since the start of the emergency. These critical facilities and services have helped limit the number of persons experiencing homelessness exposed to COVID-19. Through March 2020, nine people experiencing homelessness died from COVID-19, or about 1.74 percent of all COVID-19 related deaths in Denver.

## Increased Demand for Shelter

While the maximum number of beds available across the city's shelter network has been addressed through these different emergency options, the actual number of guests actually accessing shelter has steadily increased. The city's network of shelters accommodates approximately 2,200 people nightly as of March 2021, representing a nearly 60% increase from the 1,350 people the network served per night, on average, during the two weeks prior to the pandemic.

**Figure 3. Average Shelter Capacity and Nightly Shelter Guests Per Month**



Note: Shelter capacity and guest counts only include congregate shelters until April 19, 2020. Shelter capacity prior to the onset of the pandemic reflects the number of sleeping spaces facilities could typically accommodate.

# Sheltering Response (cont.)

## Demographics of Shelter Guests

While need for shelter services increased dramatically, the demographic characteristics of shelter guests in Metro Denver did not change as a result of the pandemic. While most shelter guests were white (57%), people of color continued to be overrepresented; 23% of shelter guests were black and 5% were American Indian or Alaska Native. Hispanic and Latino residents made up about 23% percent of shelter guests. Most shelter guests were men (71%), while 26% were women, 1% were transgender, and 0.4% were gender non-conforming. Most shelter users (62%) were between the ages of 25 and 54, but 18% were ages 55 to 65 and 5% were age 65 and older, placing them at more severe risk from the virus. The shelter system served 919 veterans during the pandemic. 31% of shelter guests stated they had a disabling condition that made it difficult for them to live independently.

## Facilities

Throughout the pandemic response, the need for 24/7 sheltering services has only grown more apparent and urgent. While the city and its partners have worked to convert existing shelters to 24/7 services, HOST recognizes the need for more. Moving to a 24/7 sheltering system is a critical component of Denver's [Three-Year Shelter Strategy](#). In 2021, HOST anticipates the opening of a new facility at 4600 E. 48th Ave. The new facility will have approximately 82,000 square feet and is expected to shelter 400 – 450 individuals with current social distancing requirements, and even more under more normal circumstances, and is expected to accommodate pets. The city is currently in the process of renovating the site so it can accommodate guests in the coming months.

## Collaboration and Partners

Activation and operations of emergency shelters would not have been possible without the critical support of service partners that serve people experiencing homelessness. City agencies and other partners also stepped in to fill critical gaps, including the Department of Human Services that helped to redeploy and hire around 100 city staff to support emergency shelter response. And our special thanks to partners in the Colorado National Guard who stepped in to provide critical staffing needs at emergency shelters, deploying more than 170 members to serve those experiencing homelessness in Denver between March and June 2020.



# Unsheltered Response

As part of its continuing mission to build a healthy, housed, and connected Denver, and in response to the ongoing needs of unsheltered residents during the COVID-19 pandemic, HOST and its partners implemented several strategies to ensure the safety of those living outside the shelter system in Denver.

## **Safe Outdoor Space**

HOST opened a procurement process to find a provider for temporary managed campsites, also known as Safe Outdoor Spaces. From this effort, the city entered into an agreement with Colorado Village Collaborative to operate two Safe Outdoor Space sites, one in partnership with St. Francis Center. These managed areas provide shelter, food, and services to approximately 100 households across the two sites. Another non-profit organization, Earthlinks, also runs a third site with Interfaith Alliance and without city funding. These spaces allow persons experiencing unsheltered homelessness to live in a safe, socially distanced, and hygienic area while also providing health screenings, access to COVID-19 testing, housing and employment referrals, and benefits navigation.

Since their inception, Safe Outdoor Space sites have seen many positive outcomes. According to Colorado Village Collaborative, residents at the existing site are already experiencing positive outcomes, including:

- five residents moving into tiny homes in the organization's Beloved Community Village;
- five residents have entered into OneHome, the region's coordinated entry system;
- 14 residents have received dental cleanings;
- two residents are continuing their sobriety journeys;
- seven residents have been connected with mental health services;
- one resident has secured employment in a previous field and is saving for an apartment; and
- multiple residents have been contacted for job interviews as of March 2021.

## **Strategic Outreach to Large Encampments**

In response to the ongoing pandemic, HOST also launched and completed a procurement to expand Street Outreach engagements with a specialized team, Strategic Outreach to Large Encampments (SOLE). SOLE is embedded within the 18 member outreach team, Denver Street Outreach Collaborative (DSOC), to focus specifically on large encampment deployment with primary and behavioral health support, and peer support services. SOLE positions are additive to the DSOC and provide DSOC capacity to make enduring, trauma-responsive relationships that facilitate tailored, housing-focused outreach interventions by DSOC.

## **Wellness Winnie**

HOST has partnered with the Denver Department of Health and Environment (DDPHE) across a range of pandemic response efforts, including DDPHE's deployment of the "Wellness Winnie," a mobile unit offering integrated behavioral health care and peer support services to meet people where they are, with a focus on traveling to underserved neighborhoods. The program was launched Feb. 25, 2020 as a pre-pandemic response that was converted to COVID-19 response once the state of emergency was declared. During the pandemic response, Wellness Winnie staff provided low-barrier services, such as food, hygiene and survival supplies, personal protective equipment, and a brief check in conversation. People may receive more intensive services, such as behavioral health assessment and crisis intervention, peer support/navigation, case management, triage and transport to more intensive services, overdose education and Naloxone (opioid overdose medication) distribution.

From August 2020 through end of February 2021, Wellness Winnie has:

- connected with 2,096 people;
- distributed 20 Narcan (opioid overdose nasal spray) kits;
- conducted 20 overdose awareness trainings;
- conducted 99 peer support and navigation sessions;
- conducted 41 clinical case management sessions; and
- 20% of people have returned two to five times for a service.

# Testing & Vaccination

Ensuring access to COVID-19 testing and vaccination is a top priority for City and County of Denver. Throughout the pandemic, DDPHE and HOST have coordinated with partners to offer testing for vulnerable populations through street outreach, at shelters, and in protective action. In the spring of 2020, HOST and DDPHE joined with experts and lead organizations on clinical services, shelter, and services related to people experiencing homelessness to form the [Denver Joint Task Force](#). The task force includes representatives from HOST and DDPHE, as well as Colorado Coalition for the Homeless; Denver Health Hospital and Denver Public Health; Denver Human Services; Denver Homeless Leadership Council; and Metro Denver Homeless Initiative. The task force collaborates to plan resources and update strategy in accordance with epidemiologic data and evolving CDC best practices, and to advocate for the needs of people experiencing homelessness in order to optimize health outcomes and promote equity in the response to COVID-19. Through this collaborative effort, HOST can ensure people experiencing homelessness and housing instability have access to safe testing procedures and supportive services that prioritize their health and wellbeing. The testing also helped connect people to Activated Respite as appropriate for isolation and to limit exposure and community spread of COVID.

## **Shelter & Encampment Testing**

Testing efforts in Denver, like in other communities, started with pilot “surveillance testing” approach to test only a randomized sample of people at a location. These pilots helped assess the feasibility of expanded testing for persons experiencing homelessness and obtain preliminary epidemiologic data to guide further resource planning for outbreak prevention and control. Early testing efforts were conducted in partnership with the [Denver Joint Task Force](#) for guests accessing a Denver day shelter, and at a downtown Denver encampment. Data collected from these early efforts, along with guidance released from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in response to cluster outbreaks across shelters nationally, helped inform a more “universal testing” approach where staff and guests at a local shelter or service location are all tested at the same time to identify and address a possible outbreak early.

The Denver Joint Task Force has included close coordination among public health and health care partners working to support persons experiencing homelessness during the pandemic, including the Denver Department of Public Health and Environment (DDPHE), Denver Public Health (DPH), and the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless among other partners. As of March 2021, DDPHE and DPH have tested 3,571 people experiencing homelessness and 733 staff members in congregate settings throughout Denver.

## **Vaccination Clinics**

HOST is also working in conjunction with the coalition of partners on the Denver Joint Task Force and the Denver Emergency Operations Center to provide vaccination clinics to persons experiencing homelessness who meet the state guidelines. As of mid-March 2021, the partners have provided an estimated 853 vaccines to persons experiencing homelessness. This number does not include people who may have received vaccinations through their primary care physician or a specialty clinic.

# Housing Response

The Department of Housing Stability's commitment to creating and preserving affordable housing in Denver has been vital during the pandemic, when more people than ever were in jeopardy of losing their homes. HOST leveraged its existing programs to continue to help households maintain and regain housing during the pandemic.

## Rehousing Supports

The department's rehousing programs helped more than 1,800 households from the start of the emergency through December 2020. This includes nimble strategies like rapid resolution which helps households new to an experience of homelessness quickly reconnect with a place to stay, and through the provision of bridge housing that provides residents with a leased apartment or hotel room while they connect to long-term options. HOST also invests in supportive housing programs, combining rental subsidies with supportive services for a more long-term support for those with deeper needs. Through a system-wide focus on housing outcomes, HOST partners helped households experiencing homelessness regain and maintain permanent housing. More than 1,000 households were in permanent housing when they left one of HOST's shelter, street outreach, or rehousing programs.

HOST also launched new initiatives to meet the increased need. In partnership with Colorado Coalition for the Homeless as the lead agency of a group of providers, HOST funded a Rehousing Collaborative in 2020. The Collaborative is aimed at providing term-limited rental assistance and services for individuals needing additional support to resolve an episode of homelessness. The focus of the program is to deploy resources that can support those who need a limited amount of assistance to exit homelessness to stable housing. The program, which is funded through 2021, will serve an estimated 200 households with term-limited rental assistance and supportive services including case management, peer navigation support, primary and behavioral health care, employment services, vocational training, and more.

HOST is also funding rapid rehousing which provides rent assistance and some service supports for a limited amount of time, typically 6-24 months, through U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG) funds. In 2020, ESG funds were competitively solicited and granted to HOST's provider partners for rehousing supports alongside homelessness prevention supports that help keep someone from losing current housing and becoming homeless. These funds will serve approximately 75 households. The Emergency Solutions Grant - Coronavirus program is also providing rapid rehousing interventions to persons experiencing homelessness due to COVID-19. These funds will provide rehousing and other supports to approximately 100 households.

## New Affordable Housing Construction

While the uncertainty and restructuring of resources at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic caused some minor impacts to development and construction of affordable housing projects, the pipeline rebounded and currently has 13 projects totaling 1,088 units under construction across the city, with another 19 projects planned this year. Several standout projects of the past year include:



**Legacy Lofts**, located at 2175 California St., will offer 98 affordable units plus a 75-bed recuperative care center, all aimed at those most in need. All the units will be restricted to those earning 30% or less of the area median income. The property will be operated by Colorado Coalition for the Homeless.



Funding was approved in March for **Valor on the Fax**, located at 7900 E. Colfax Ave. The building will offer 72 affordable units and supportive services to those earning 30% or less of the area median income. The project also has a unique partnership with Brain Injury Alliance Colorado, so the property will offer a place to individuals with traumatic brain injuries.

## Housing Response (cont.)



HOST also celebrated the groundbreaking of the **Capitol Square Apartments** in 2020. The 103 income-restricted units are located at the corner of 13th Avenue and Sherman Street. The 73 one-bedroom and 30 two-bedroom units will be restricted to those earning between 30% and 80% of the area median income. The apartments are slated to open in July 2022.

### **Temporary Rental and Utility Assistance**

The Department of Housing Stability also ramped up its Temporary Rental and Utility Assistance (TRUA) program during the pandemic, in response to rapidly growing need. The TRUA program helps Denver residents facing eviction and other financial hardships to stay in their homes by helping with rent and utility payments. Demand for rent and utility support has continued to increase throughout the pandemic, spiking by more than 60 percent in January 2021 over the month prior. Denver is helping meet this unprecedented need through new program funds totaling nearly \$22 million from the U.S. Department of Treasury, as well as more than \$13 million in other federal and local funds that have been dedicated since March 2020. The Center for Disease Control's moratorium on evictions and the State's Executive Orders also provided many Denver residents with extended time to resolve nonpayment of rent, a prohibition on late fees, and respite from eviction proceedings, foreclosures, and public utility disconnections. HOST provided more than 2,500 unduplicated households with TRUA assistance in 2020, a 150% increase from 2019. The program worked with community navigators and nonprofit partners to reduce barriers in accessing the program including a revised application, more flexible program and documentation requirements, and increased language access and support. HOST also worked with Denver's Office of Social Equity and Innovation and UC Berkeley on a targeted mailer campaign to increase awareness of the program for residents at risk of eviction. Early in the pandemic, HOST also established a mortgage assistance program that helped nearly 40 unique households. Demand for the program was lower than originally anticipated due to mortgage forbearance policies.

## 2021 Action Plan

At the start of the pandemic, HOST had begun preparations for drafting its first five-year strategic plan. However, as priorities shifted toward saving lives and the immediate needs of those most vulnerable, stakeholders and the Executive Committee advised HOST to pivot and instead write a one-year planning document, the 2021 Action Plan. The plan outlines HOST's operations, its goals and intended outcomes, and provides a framework for continuing the emergency response.

## Five-Year Strategic Plan

At the beginning of 2021, HOST began the renewed process of developing its five-year strategic plan in collaboration with residents and stakeholders. The plan, covering years 2022-2026, will articulate a vision for how Denver can provide housing stability for all through its investments, policy priorities, and partnerships. It will establish clear, measurable goals and align strategies to achieve those goals, including how dedicated funding sources for affordable housing and homelessness resolution will be prioritized. The draft plan will be available for public comment in August 2021 and submitted to City Council for approval by Nov. 1, 2021.

## Homelessness Resolution Fund

In November 2020, Denver voters established the Homelessness Resolution Fund, a dedicated revenue stream to support residents experiencing or exiting homelessness. Over the next 10 years, the fund will build 1,800 units of additional housing with support services and create 500-600 new units of shelter or housing in catalytic projects that combine shelter and housing at the same location. Long-term uses of the Homelessness Resolution Fund will be determined through strategic plans and subsequent annual plans. HOST drafted, received public feedback, and finalized an addendum to the 2021 Action Plan that provides a framework for investment of the Homelessness Resolution Fund. This document shows how revenue from the fund will be used to supplement other efforts in its first year. The 2021 Action Plan is foundational for this work because it is grounded in needs of Denver residents experiencing homelessness and housing instability.



# Summary

Throughout the year-long, ongoing emergency response to COVID-19, HOST's top priorities have been saving lives and ensuring the safety of those experiencing homelessness and housing instability in Denver. The \$56.3 million of emergency spending spent on emergency sheltering and supplies so far has had tremendous impact on our ability to meet these goals. It has also impacted many residents positively, from those who were previously living outside and are now inside to those who accessed emergency rental assistance or who have been reached while living unsheltered on the streets.

HOST remains committed to utilizing our resources to best serve residents in need.

## ***Critical partners in this area include:***

Aramark  
Base Tactical  
Bayaud Enterprises  
Brothers Redevelopment Inc.  
Catholic Charities of Denver  
Colorado Affordable Legal Services  
Colorado Coalition for the Homeless (CCH)  
Colorado Housing Assistance Corporation  
Colorado Legal Services  
Colorado Village Collaborative  
Corporation for Supportive Housing  
Del Norte Neighborhood Development Corporation  
Denver Public Health  
Denver Rescue Mission  
Earthlinks  
East Colfax Community Collective  
Family Promise of Greater Denver  
GES Coalition  
Haven of Hope  
Interfaith Alliance  
International Medical Relief  
Jewish Family Services  
KM Concessions  
Mental Health Center of Denver  
Metro Denver Homeless Initiative  
Mile High United Way  
National Western Stock Show  
Northeast Denver Housing Center  
Securitas  
Senior Support Services  
Spark the Change  
St. Francis Center  
Stadium Medical  
Stout Street Medical Center (CCH)  
Strategy with Rox  
The Delores Project  
The Gathering Place  
The Salvation Army  
Urban Peak  
Volunteers of America  
Women's Homelessness Initiative

## ***Special thanks to city and other public partners that supported emergency response:***

311 City Services  
City Attorney's Office  
City Council  
Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE)  
Colorado Division of Housing – Department of Local Affairs  
Colorado National Guard  
Community Planning and Development  
Denver Arts and Venues  
Denver Department of Public Health and Environment (DDPHE)  
Denver Economic Development & Opportunity (DEDO)  
Denver Parks and Recreation (DPR)  
Denver Public Library  
Denver Human Services (DHS)  
Department of Finance (DOF)  
Department of Safety  
Department of Transportation and Infrastructure (DOTI)  
Division of Disability Rights (in HRCP)  
General Services  
Human Rights and Community Partnerships (HRCP)  
Office of Colorado Governor Jered Polis  
Office of Emergency Management  
Office of Human Resources  
Office of Denver Mayor Michael Hancock  
Office of Social Equity and Innovation (OSEI)  
Real Estate Division (DOF)  
Regional Transportation District  
State Emergency Operations Center

***Special thank you to Denver Rescue Mission for use of photos.***



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