

Denver Homeless Out Loud
2260 California St Denver CO 80205
denverhomelessoutloud.org

Dear Robert McDonald and others in Denver Department of Public Health and Environment (DDPHE),

We are writing to request that DDPHE cancel the planned closure of the area along Stout, 22nd, Champa, and Park Ave where hundreds of people without housing are living as they cannot afford housing.

This closure is being justified as a “health and safety emergency” while the real health and safety emergency is the fact that housing is made unattainable for poor people, when people have no viable choice but to sleep on the streets. The City does not provide them with any of the basic sanitation services that every human needs and that are provided to people who can afford housing. If DDPHE really wants to protect the health and safety of the hundreds of people living on the streets in this area, DDPHE should begin to provide the basic health and sanitation needs in this community instead of spending thousands of dollars pushing over 100 people to some other block where they will face the same struggles and lack of resources.

As you know, the CDC has sent guidance that encampments should not be swept and instead sanitation resources should be provided. Frequent handwashing was among the basic preventative measures suggested by CDC. As CDC states, moving our homeless around the city through sweeps instead of providing sanitation resources only increases the risk of spreading the virus.

The “move along” approach to homelessness, and to encampments in particular, is utterly unsustainable, ineffective, harmful, costly, and immoral. It is time to learn directly from residents of these encampments and take a new more effective, more humane, more sustainable approach.

First off, residents of these camps have requested that you, Bob McDonald and other decision makers from DDPHE, come to the camp to meet with them and hear real solutions from the residents to your concerns. This request was made on camera during the last DDPHE lead sweep and closure on May 27th on California and 21st. (Watch the discussion with camp residents and DDPHE staff [here](#)). Please let us know when you can schedule this meeting and we will arrange the place and participants with camp residents.

Second, the letter from DDPHE on “concerns in encampment” regarding the closure of these areas has many inaccuracies and discriminatory statements.

Port-a-potties - The letter states that the port-a-potties, which we as Denver Homeless Out Loud (DHOL) pay for since the City refused to follow CDC guidance or do their job to provide public resources, are not maintained or cleaned. This is simply false. We pay a company to

service them 5 days a week, as well as additionally paying someone on the street to do an extra cleaning every day. There was a five day stretch when the company screwed us over by not servicing them, however, we remedied this and the company gave us credit for the days not serviced. These port-a-potties are cleaned with disinfectant every day - something not even city port-a-potties have done. If you compare the cleanliness of these port-a-potties to city contracted potties in heavy use parks you will see our potties are just as clean or more. To address the issue of clean potties best, more potties should be provided - which we do not have the funds to afford.

Camps Growing - The letter states, “Despite DDPHE efforts...to conduct COVID outreach in these areas, the camps have grown larger....” The assumption that COVID outreach would stop people from being homeless and needing somewhere safe to stay is completely disconnected from reality. People are looking for a safe place to stay in their tent where they can get rest, have privacy, be near food and water and bathrooms, and have a network of support in their community. If DDPHE really wanted to keep the camps from growing, you all would be opening housing, and providing more long term hotels, vacant lots, or City sites so that people have other dispersed options of somewhere to stay.

Large Structures, Couches, Chairs, Grills, ect - The letter raised concern over large structures, couches, chairs, grills, and other things. Yet, how many DDPHE staff have a couch on the porch of their home? How many DDPHE staff have chairs at home? Would you like to live without these things? Do only housed people deserve a chair or grill? Are these structures bigger than any of DDPHE’s houses? This kind of discriminatory treatment of houseless people that “they do not deserve these luxuries” is based in a deep level of discrimination against houseless people.

Furthermore, this letter draws the conclusion that the solution to the issues raised is to close the area and direct everyone to the shelters. This “solution” is the farthest you can get from a solution. It has been publicly documented that warehouse shelters have been incubators for the virus and data show a high concentration of the virus among both guests and staff. The solution you refer to is based on treating houseless people as disposable, as trash that can be hidden away “somewhere else.” Not only is this approach inhumane, it is utterly ineffective at meeting the stated goal to address health and safety. Below are some real solutions to the issues raised in the letter.

Large Camps Without Spacing Due to Denver Sweeps and Closures - When encampments get extra large this is often because of the following: there are that many people without housing who need a place to be, the area is ideal due to proximity to resources and connection to service providers, the area consists of vacant lots, less used parking lots or have spaces less likely to be disruptive to a neighborhood, people are looking to be near a community they know and depend on, and/ or policing or fencing in other areas has pushed them to this area. In order to address the large size of these camps housing should be made available so people don’t have to live on the streets. If that is not happening in a timely manner, hotels can be used for long term stays. If that is not happening in a timely manner, fences can be taken down from the

public right of way to bring back options for people to space out more and City sites or vacant parking lots can be opened for people to live with more space. Additionally, large plastic storage bins, trash cans, or other needed items could be provided and placed between each tent to maintain the CDC recommended 12 feet of space per-tent.

Trash - The solution to trash is straightforward - trash cans, dumpsters, and regular servicing. In Denver, each household (on average about 2-5 people) gets up to a 95 gallon trash bin which is dumped every week by the City. In addition, once a month, there is a large items collection day for each house. Just because someone is living on the streets in a tent without housing does not mean they don't need or deserve the same trash collection services. Each tent should have its own trash can, each block should have its own dumpster (just like an apartment complex), and those dumpsters should be emptied at least once or twice a week (depending on the size of the camp and dumpster). This is a basic city infrastructure that is being denied people without housing. Random trash pick up by the city crew with police and other workers does not meet the need. As noted in the letter, large piles of trash are gathered up to 3 feet high - that is because camp residents are doing their best to gather trash in one place in lieu of having a proper dumpster.

Human Waste - Again, the solution here is straightforward - bathrooms. We as DHOL have stepped in to pay for what we can by getting 3 port-a-potties for the camps in this area, but more are needed to meet the need. Legally, there should be one bathroom for every ten people. That could mean these camps should have at least ten port-a-potties. This should not be the job of local non-profits to pay for. This should be the responsibility of the City - which is even laid out in the CDC guidance.

Needles - The safe way to dispose of needles is in sharps boxes. These are expensive for a poor non-profit like us. We have one installed in a port-a-pottie in the area, but more are needed. Furthermore, more centers like Harm Reduction Action Center are needed to support injection drug users in struggles and exchange needles for clean ones where they are properly disposed of.

These are just a few of the solutions to the issues raised. More solutions can be discussed with residents of these camps.

In addition, all of these solutions for the health and safety issues raised one other point that must be addressed.

Cleaner than in a Long Time, Some Areas totally Clean - While outside eye's, like DDPHE staff, may not have the context of looking at the past for these or other camps, residents of these camps and us in Denver Homeless Out Loud, do. What we all know is that many of the camps in this area are cleaner than they have been in a long time. Residents are stepping up to clean the blocks daily, gather trash in one area, and otherwise work to keep the area cleaner and safer than is often the case. For DDPHE to completely ignore this makes it ever more clear that this closure is not about health and safety, but about politics and real estate investment and

thus getting folks out of the area to meet the desire of the entities not based on public health. If you compare these camps to many others you will see that these camps are actually cleaner than many. So where is the justification to close these camps at this time? Furthermore, you will see that while some areas of these camps can get a bit messy, many - if not most - tents are clean with no trash around them whatsoever. Is DDPHE going to punish the residents of totally clean camps just because a couple camps are messy? Would the City shut down and evict a whole apartment complex if a couple apartments were messy? This kind of all or nothing approach to what is supposed to be a health and safety issue is discriminatory, unjust, and ineffective. It provides no incentive for camps to stay clean.

The fact that these particular camps are being targeted for closure at a time when they are cleaner than they have been in the past and a time when there are plenty of other similar camps shows very clearly that this is about politics and real estate investment, and not health.

Lastly, it must be noted that the conclusion that this closure can, or should, be used to get people to go to the shelters is false and dangerous. Residents of these camps are not going to go to the shelter because they are moved or told to move. They are staying in tents for many reasons including the privacy, flexibility of time and freedom, health and safety concerns in shelters, among countless other reasons. Furthermore, to tell people to go to shelters at this, of all times, is insane. Every health guidance and City rule advises that people should not gather in large groups and that being outside is safer than being in densely populated indoor environments. The recent rule changes for restaurants makes it clear that having people sit outside to eat is safer than sitting in groups inside. The fact that once it comes to people who are homeless all this common sense and guidance go out the window is problematic to say the least. Just because someone is homeless should not mean they are told to go to a mass shelter with hundreds of others - especially when there are currently at least 93 positive COVID cases just in the men's shelter. This is unjust and inhumane.

The reality is after an encampment area like this is closed, the camp residents will move to other nearby blocks, toward neighborhoods, down to the river, to other existing camps (thus growing those camps), and to other less safe areas. (We encourage you to read more about this in our street survey report [Unhealthy By Design](#)).

In conclusion, we request that DDPHE schedule a meeting with camp residents, cancel the planned closure of the area along Stout, 22nd, Champa, and Park Ave, and instead begin to partner with us in DHOL and camp residents to provide real solutions to the health needs of these camps instead of trying to sweep human beings under the rug.

Sincerely,
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