

June 15, 2020  
(Via email)

Dear Denver Homeless Out Loud,

Thank you for reaching out to the Denver Department of Public Health & Environment (DDPHE) to share your concerns and ideas. Please consider this my response to your correspondence.

As Denver's public health department, DDPHE strives to prevent disease and promote health for all our communities. As part of this mission, we have a responsibility to address unsafe, unhealthy, and unsanitary conditions impacting the health and well-being of everyone in our city. Like Denver Homeless Out Loud, DDPHE believes in protecting and advocating for the dignity, rights, and choices of people experiencing homelessness. As a health department and a city, we work diligently to connect with people experiencing homelessness and provide them with services and options that improve their behavioral health, physical health, food access, shelter, and housing.

We recognize the challenges to the physical, mental, and emotional welfare of our people experiencing homelessness. We stand with them as we seek to address its root causes and prioritize more immediate opportunities for access to permanent housing. This is a time of unparalleled challenges to our city as a whole, and we appreciate the pressure and stress that people experiencing homelessness must feel, especially now.

As the city's public health department, we have an obligation to consider the interests of all Denver residents, including those who are concerned about the impacts of extreme conditions found in some – but certainly not all – encampments. We have received legitimate messages of concern regarding certain outdoor living situations in our city. With that in mind, please know that this does not apply to all outdoor living situations. Our team performs regular visits to camps across the city, and we acknowledge that all are not the same.

The Denver Department of Transportation and Infrastructure (DOTI) conducts regular maintenance and cleanups of encampment areas. As long as this maintenance is sufficient to keep these areas sanitary and safe, the likelihood of acute public and environmental health issues occurring is reduced, and the need to enact a temporary access restriction greatly decreases. We agree that some residents of the camps are indeed taking steps to keep their areas organized and clean. However, this is clearly not the case in every situation.

DDPHE will continue to temporarily restrict access to areas that, after close observation and evaluation by our team of public health professionals, present significant public and environmental health risks due to unsafe and deteriorating conditions. These primarily are associated with the presence of piles of uncontained trash, used needles, insects and other vermin, human waste, and other biohazards. This means that some areas may be temporarily restricted for any purpose other

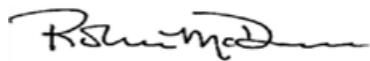
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than passing through on the public rights-of-way to visit businesses, residences, and service providers. This kind of restriction is necessary to allow clearing, cleaning, assessment, and mitigation of public health and environmental risks in heavily used areas that present public health concerns. The area must be free and clear of inhabitants and encumbrances to allow the evaluation by our team. Areas re-open when abatement and clean-up measures have restored them to a safe and stable state.

When conditions deteriorate to the point at which the public health department must temporarily restrict access to a public location, please understand that the balance of risks – including those to the people who are seeking temporary haven – have been considered in terms of maintaining a safe and healthy environment for all residents of Denver. This is especially true as we work to decrease the spread of the COVID-19 virus, to which people experiencing homelessness are especially vulnerable.

Numerous city departments are working together to provide for the many and varied critical needs of people experiencing homelessness. These include but are not limited to access to health care, employment, and other supportive services that promote long-term housing stability, reduce recidivism, and improve quality of life. As a city, we continue to make investments in effective, evidence-based programs to change, and potentially save the lives of people experiencing homelessness.

DDPHE does not have authority or control over all the suggestions you offer in your correspondence, but we have shared your letter with other agencies working on this and related issues. We appreciate your invitation to meet and we will consider your invitation when we can coordinate and be inclusive of other city entities involved in efforts associated with homelessness. DDPHE remains committed to working with our partners in this space, including other city departments, service providers, and advocates for people experiencing homelessness as we move forward together with compassion and concern for all of Denver's residents.



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