COMMON SENSE INSTITUTE

NO PLACE TO CALL HOME: THE STARK REALITY OF HOMELESSNESS IN COLORADO

AUTHORS: DUSTIN ZVONEK, DR. CAITLIN MCKENNIE & DJ SUMMERS

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dustin Zvonek, Homelessness Fellow

Zvonek brings extensive public policy and executive leadership experience to the Common Sense Institute (CSI). As a former small business owner, bank and nonprofit executive, and public servant, his career reflects a deep commitment to finding practical solutions for complex challenges.

Elected to the Aurora City Council, which represents Colorado's third-largest city, Zvonek served as an at-large member and mayor pro tem. He played a pivotal role in addressing homelessness by traveling across the country to study strategies and best practices. His efforts culminated in authorship of a resolution that ensured the Aurora Regional Navigation Campus for the homeless remained committed to a "work first" model that emphasized treatment, personal accountability, and a structured path to self-sufficiency. Additionally, Zvonek chaired the Management and Finance and Public Safety Committees and represented Aurora on the boards of the Aurora Economic Development Council and the Fitzsimons Innovation Community, a hub for health and life sciences.

Prior to his public service, Zvonek served as district and communications director for a federal lawmaker, policy director for the Colorado State Senate minority leader, and vice president of strategy and innovation for a national nonprofit, where he drove strategic growth and organizational innovation.

A graduate of Colorado State University, Zvonek lives in Southeast Aurora with his wife, Ann, and their four children. An avid runner and fitness enthusiast, he balances his professional endeavors with a passion for family and community engagement.

Dr. Caitlin McKennie, Director of Research

McKennie is an experienced economist and demographer who comes to CSI with more than eight years of experience working as a public servant in Colorado. She worked as an economist for multiple agencies, including the State Demography Office at the Department of Local Affairs; the Colorado Workforce Development Council at the Department of Labor and Employment; the Office of State Planning and Budgeting in Governor Jared Polis's office; and the Department of Natural Resources.

DJ Summers, Director of Communications and Research Operations

Summers is CSI's Director of Policy and Research. He oversees CSI's fellows and research staff, coordinates with partners, iterates and analyzes projects, and breaks down findings for the public, legislators, and commercial leaders.

ABOUT COMMON SENSE INSTITUTE

Common Sense Institute is a non-partisan research organization dedicated to the protection and promotion of Colorado's economy. CSI is at the forefront of important discussions concerning the future of free enterprise and aims to have an impact on the issues that matter most to Coloradans. CSI's mission is to examine the fiscal impacts of policies, initiatives, and proposed laws so that Coloradans are educated and informed on issues impacting their lives. CSI employs rigorous research techniques and dynamic modeling to evaluate the potential impact of these measures on the economy and individual opportunity..

TEAMS & FELLOWS STATEMENT

CSI is committed to independent, in-depth research that examines the impacts of policies, initiatives, and proposed laws so that Coloradans are educated and informed on issues impacting their lives. CSI's commitment to institutional independence is rooted in the individual independence of our researchers, economists, and fellows. At the core of CSI's mission is a belief in the power of the free enterprise system. Our work explores ideas that protect and promote jobs and the economy, and the CSI team and fellows take part in this pursuit with academic freedom. Our team's work is informed by data-driven research and evidence. The views and opinions of fellows do not reflect the institutional views of CSI. CSI operates independently of any political party and does not take positions.

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INTRODUCTION

There are two broad approaches to homelessness. **Housing first** prioritizes providing stable, permanent housing to individuals experiencing homelessness without preconditions such as sobriety, employment, or mental health treatment. The core idea is that housing is a basic human right, and that once a person has a secure place to live, they are better able to address other challenges like mental health, substance use, or unemployment.

The second approach is best described as **intervention first or work first**. Under this approach, providers use a tiered system of shelter, treatment, and training to build self-sufficiency. Housing is assumed to be the byproduct of self-governing behavior rather than a human right. Program residents must abide by sobriety rules, work or workforce training requirements, and potentially contribute portions of their pay to the program itself.

The federal government favors the housing first approach, which produces an unintended consequence. Under current law, federal funds from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) designated for housing first uses cannot be used for any other approach. Until this policy changes, some cities may not be able to access valuable federal funds to execute alternative approaches to homelessness like intervention first or work first.

As homelessness has grown in Colorado and in the Denver metro area, some local and state leaders have championed housing first policies. Denver's All In Mile High program embodies a housing first approach. Other cities have adopted work first policies, meanwhile, but these programs are generally unable to secure federal aid due to HUD's housing first prioritization.

CSI has analyzed the trends associated with each approach to better understand outcomes.

KEY POINTS

- Colorado has a homelessness problem, but housing first policies may not be the best approach to addressing this challenge.

- State and local leaders should implement block grant funding, prioritize accountability and metrics, and expand public-private partnerships.

- Federal lawmakers should reform current laws so cities do not have to sacrifice federal money in order to explore approaches other than housing first.

- Colorado's homeless population grew by 90% from 2020 to 2024, the fourth highest growth rate in the country.

- Colorado ranked ninth in the United States for homelessness per capita, with just over three individuals per 1,000 dealing with homelessness.

- In 2024, the number of unhoused individuals in the Denver metro area rose 10% from the previous year. There were 9,977 unhoused individuals that year, a record high and an increase of 74% from just five years earlier.

- Denver Mayor Mike Johnston launched All In Mile High, Denver's homelessness initiative, in July 2023. It aims to provide housing, shelter, and services to unhoused individuals by utilizing hotels, micro-communities, and other temporary housing solutions.

- As of December 17, 2024, the All in Mile High Program had served 2,233 individuals at a cost to the city of $69,413 per person.

  > The city spent $16 million on individuals who remained in unsheltered status after exiting the All-In Mile High program.
  > About 1% of All-In Mile High participants, 19 total, are known to have died while in the program.

- In the housing first cities of Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Portland, the number of homeless individuals rose by 39%, 9%, and 70%, respectively, from 2020 to 2024.

- El Paso County, Colorado which has rejected the housing first ethos, has experienced a 12% decrease in total homelessness in 2024. This change was largely driven by a decrease in the unsheltered population, which fell by 30.7%.

- Since 2019, the number of available beds in Colorado has risen 98%, nearly doubling in the space of just five years.

  > On average, between 2016 and 2024 the state's homeless population was equivalent to 54% of Denver's metro bed capacity.

- In fiscal year (FY) 2023, Colorado ranked third among all U.S. states in federal grant dollars awarded per homelessness project, with an average of $766,072 per project.

- Using federal, state, local, and nonprofit funding, Denver, Boulder, and Aurora spent a total of $405 million on homelessness initiatives in FY 2023.

- Denver's spending on homelessness doubled between 2023 and 2024, from $63 million to $135 million. These figures may not be accurate, however, since a city auditor found the city's homelessness response and spending have not been appropriately tracked.

HOMELESSNESS TRENDS IN COLORADO AND DENVER

Colorado

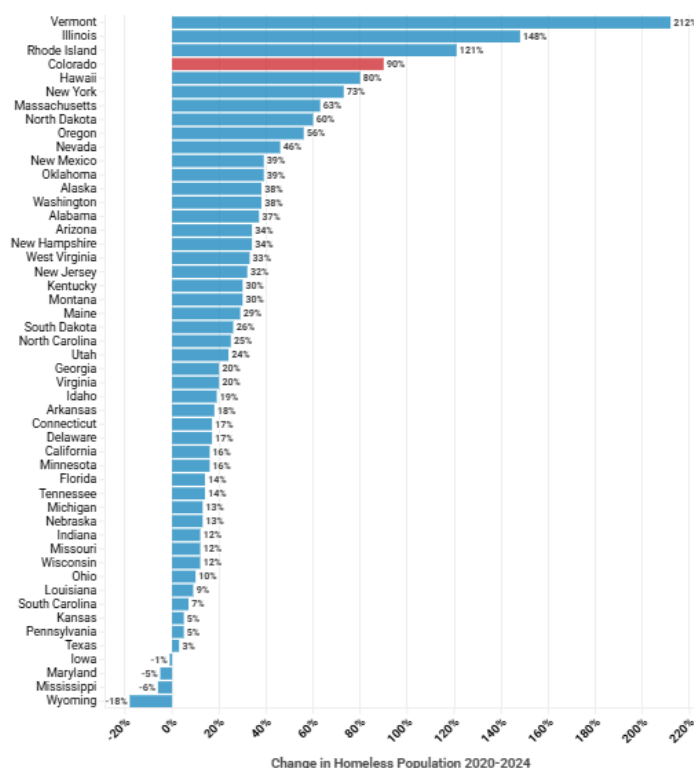Colorado's homelessness challenges are not unique, but they are profound.

The COVID-19 pandemic worsened the homelessness crisis nationwide. From 2020 to 2024, nearly every state experienced a rise in homelessness, with some seeing dramatic surges despite expanded efforts and investments to curb the growth of the unhoused population. On average, state homelessness populations grew by 34% during this period, but Colorado faced even steeper increases.

As Figure 1 shows, Colorado's homeless population grew 90% from 2020 to 2024, the 4th highest growth rate in the country. Vermont struggled the most with rising homelessness. Its unhoused population grew by 212% during this period. Illinois and Rhode Island also experienced dramatic increases in homelessness after the pandemic. From 2020 to 2024, only four states — Iowa, Maryland, Mississippi, and Wyoming — managed to reduce their homeless population.

FIGURE 1

Growth in Homeless Population Among U.S States, 2020-2024

Between 2020-2024, Colorado's homeless population grew by 90%, the 4th highest rate in the U.S, and close to triple the average growth of 34% over this time

State	Change
Vermont	212%
Illinois	148%
Rhode Island	121%
Colorado	90%
Hawaii	80%
New York	73%
Massachusetts	63%
North Dakota	60%
Oregon	56%
Nevada	46%
New Mexico	39%
Oklahoma	39%
Alaska	38%
Washington	38%
Alabama	37%
Arizona	34%
New Hampshire	34%
West Virginia	33%
New Jersey	32%
Kentucky	30%
Montana	30%
Maine	29%
South Dakota	26%
North Carolina	25%
Utah	24%
Georgia	20%
Virginia	20%
Idaho	19%
Arkansas	18%
Connecticut	17%
Delaware	17%
California	16%
Minnesota	16%
Florida	14%
Tennessee	14%
Michigan	13%
Nebraska	13%
Indiana	12%
Missouri	12%
Wisconsin	12%
Ohio	10%
Louisiana	9%
South Carolina	7%
Kansas	5%
Pennsylvania	5%
Texas	3%
Iowa	-1%
Maryland	-5%
Mississippi	-6%
Wyoming	-18%

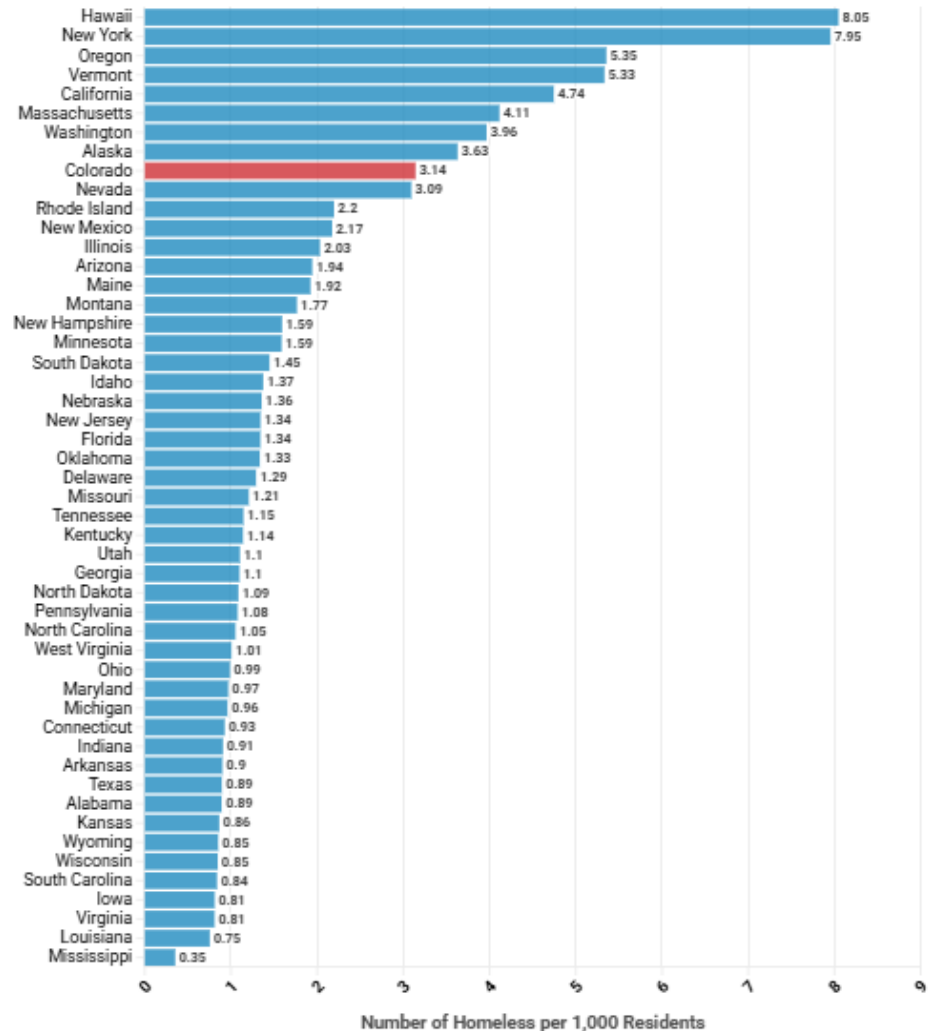Change in Homeless Population 2020-2024

Source: HUD

Additionally, Colorado's homeless population now constitutes a large share of its population. Figure 2 depicts the number of homeless individuals per 1,000 residents across all 50 states. Colorado ranked ninth in 2024 with just over 3 individuals per 1,000 experiencing homelessness. Hawaii and New York had 8 homeless individuals per 1,000, ranking them at the top of the list, while Mississippi had the smallest share at just 0.35 individuals per 1,000.

Colorado's homeless situation has reached a critical level. Both the state's total homeless population, along with the rapid recent growth, are warning signs that the state's efforts have so far not addressed this challenge.

FIGURE 2

Homeless per 1,000 Residents Among all U.S States, 2024
Colorado was 9th highest in the nation in the number of homeless per 1,000 residents

Number of Homeless per 1,000 Residents

# Denver Metro Point in Time (PIT) Counts

The state's homeless population is concentrated in the Denver metro area. As in other urban areas in the west, the city's homelessness worsened through the early 2020s. Between 2023 and 2024, the number of unhoused individuals in the Denver metro area rose by 10% to 9,977 individuals. Notably, that number was up 74% from 2019. Homelessness continued to rise even as more unhoused individuals moved into shelters. The total number of unhoused people grew 12.4% from 2023 to 2024. The number of unsheltered homeless decreased 10.5% during that period while the number of sheltered homeless grew 20%.

As Figure 4 shows, between 2023 and 2024, the number of individuals experiencing homelessness in Boulder fell to 727, a 13.3% decline. The number of homeless individuals in emergency shelters, transitional housing, and unsheltered individuals all fell. The number of unsheltered individuals declined from 243 people to 193 people, a 20.6% drop.

FIGURE 3

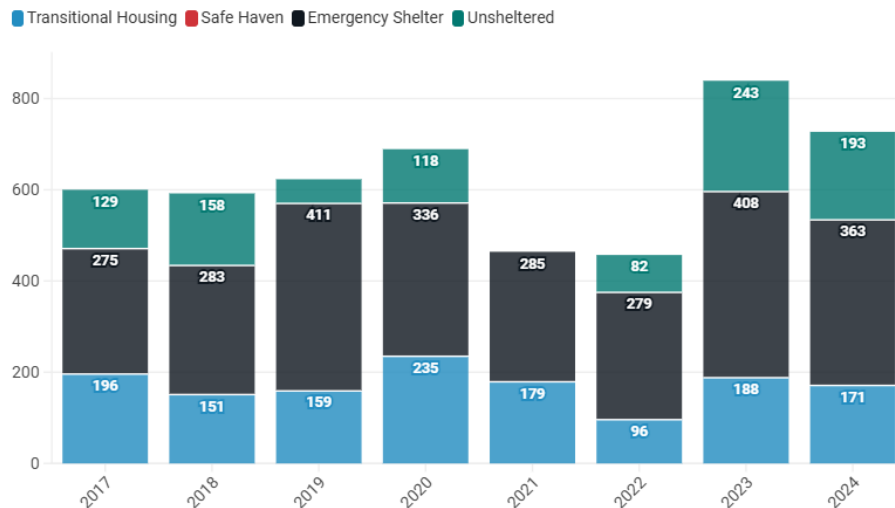## Denver Point In Time Count by Year Subcategory

Legend: ■ Transitional Housing ■ Safe Haven ■ Emergency Shelter ■ Unsheltered
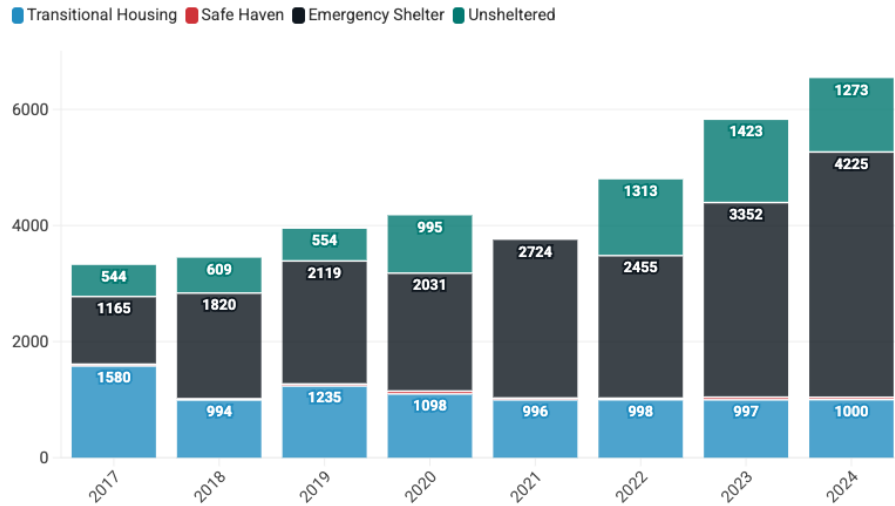
Source: MDHI PIT

FIGURE 4

Boulder Point In Time Count by Year Subcategory

Legend: ■ Transitional Housing ■ Safe Haven ■ Emergency Shelter ■ Unsheltered

Source: MDHI PIT Count

EXAMINING HOUSING FIRST, WORK FIRST IN SEVERAL CITIES

All in Mile High Spending and Results

Denver has largely prioritized a housing first approach. The current Denver mayor began the House 1,000 Initiative, now known as the All In Mile High program on July 18, 2023, with the objective of putting 1,000 homeless individuals into temporary housing within a year. As part of the initiative, the city acquired hotels and motels to convert into housing and constructed a small home village.

Denver receives significant federal funding for All In Mile High. In the first year alone, the federal government shouldered 86% of the cost. Denver does levy a 0.25% sales tax dedicated to a homeless resolution fund. The city's most recent program spending estimate was $155 million. The 2025 budget proposed to cut homelessness spending from $155 million through 2023 and 2024 (about $63,143 per homeless individual) to $57.5 million in 2025. These numbers may not be accurate, however. The Denver city auditor released a report on March 17, 2025 detailing gaps in tracking of homelessness funding. The city lacks accounting for millions of dollars in spending.

A substantial portion of the program's costs, about $48.5 million, come from hotel and motel procurement.[i] These upfront costs add a sizable portion to the per-head costs. Absent procurement costs, the city has paid $47,694 per homeless individual through 2023 and 2024.
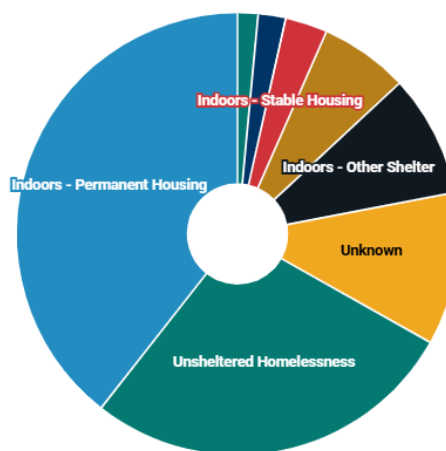
The All in Mile High program tracks its progress in terms of "exits" — what happens to participants after their 90-day initial stay ends. Through December 17, 2024, 941 people have exited the program. As Figure 5 shows, of these 39% entered some form of permanent housing and 27% fell back into unsheltered homelessness. Others are indoors but not in permanent housing, in jail, or somewhere else. The whereabouts of some are entirely unknown. The city spent about $16 million on people still unsheltered after exiting the program.

Counting participants who exited the program and people currently in it, All In Mile High has served 2,233 individuals since the current Denver mayor's administration began. Of these, 258 have returned to being unsheltered homeless. Another 61, or 3%, went to jail — a challenge that adds to the city's budget burden. Housing one inmate for a year in Colorado costs an average of more than $58,000 annually, not including supplemental treatments for health issues and other costs.[ii]

FIGURE 5

All In Mile High Program Exits (as of 12/17/2024)

Source: City of Denver

Nineteen participants, less than 1%, died while enrolled. Given that people who experience unsheltered homelessness die at a much higher rate than the general public, this metric shows a clear benefit from the program. Still, these numbers make it clear the city's All In Mile High program has experienced mixed results at this point. There are more homeless individuals in shelters and housing, but the number of people who are homeless has not declined.

Denver Homelessness Mortality

As Figure 6 shows, city medical records show homelessness is a public health issue. With 220 fatalities, overdose is the leading cause of death followed by blunt force and chronic disease.

Overdose deaths did not always make up such a large share of deaths among the homeless population. In 2018, overdoses accounted for 26% of all deaths among individuals experiencing homelessness in Denver. By 2023, that percentage had nearly tripled to 75%.

Denver Basic Income Project

Other programs also have adopted a housing first approach to homelessness. In 2024, the Denver Basic Income Project, a local non-government organization that serves unhoused individuals, ran a randomized controlled trial (RCT) of 807 unhoused Denverites. The study randomly assigned individuals to one of three different groups: two treatment groups and a comparison group.
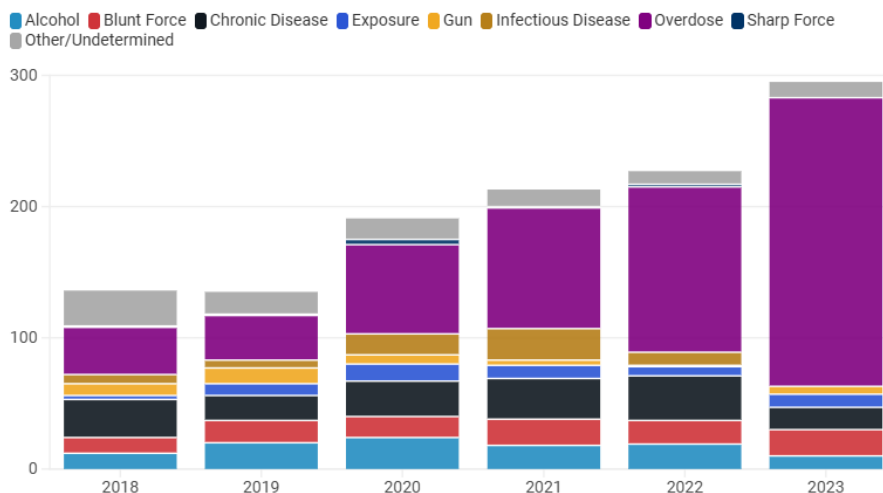
FIGURE 6
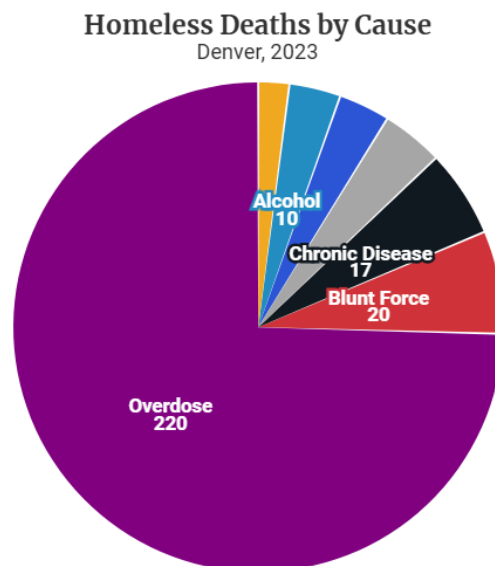
Source: Denver Office of the Medical Examiner

FIGURE 7

Source: Denver Office of the Medical Examiner

Individuals in the two treatment groups received a cash payment of $12,000 over the course of the year. The comparison group received $50 a month. Adhering to the housing first ethos, these stipends came with no strings attached. There were no sobriety or work requirements, and recipients were free to spend their stipend however they wanted.

After 10 months, the study found no statistically significant differences between the groups in terms of housing status. In other words: offering a guaranteed income did not seem to have a significant effect on reducing homelessness.

## National Outlook on Housing First Impact

Other cities with housing first policies have experienced outcomes similar to Denver's. The number of homeless individuals has risen but so has the number of people in shelters and transitional housing. We know this statement is true because of HUD's annual PIT count, which uses volunteers to estimate all sheltered and unsheltered homeless individuals on a single night each January. HUD's count is generally believed to underestimate homelessness. Still, it is the only national data available.

Let's take a look at individual cities.

As Figure 8 shows, Los Angeles, which routinely has one of the largest homeless populations in the United States, saw its homeless population increase by nearly 39% between 2020 to 2024.

FIGURE 8

Los Angeles City and County CoC PIT Count by Year
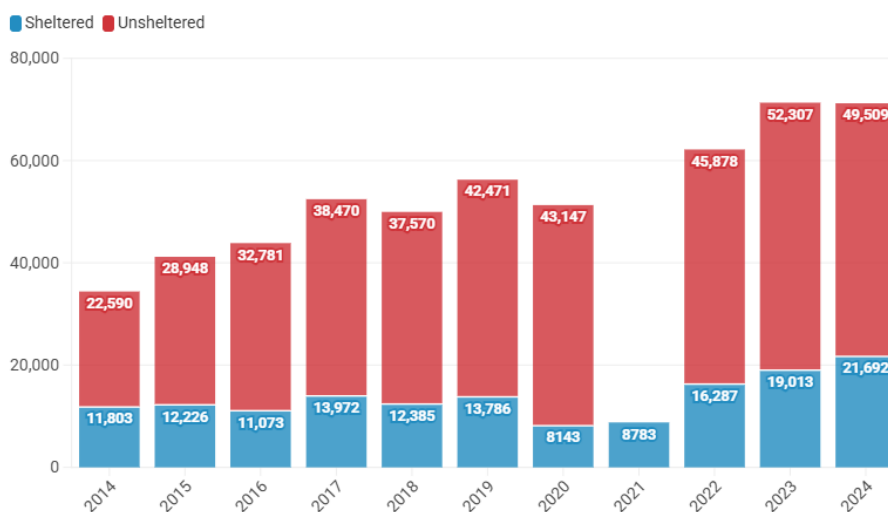
Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

As Figure 9 demonstrates, in Portland, Oregon, another housing first city, the total unhoused population in the surrounding county increased 70% between 2020 and 2024.

In San Francisco, a third housing first city, the total number of unhoused individuals rose 9% between 2020 and 2024. These outcomes are shown in Figure 10.
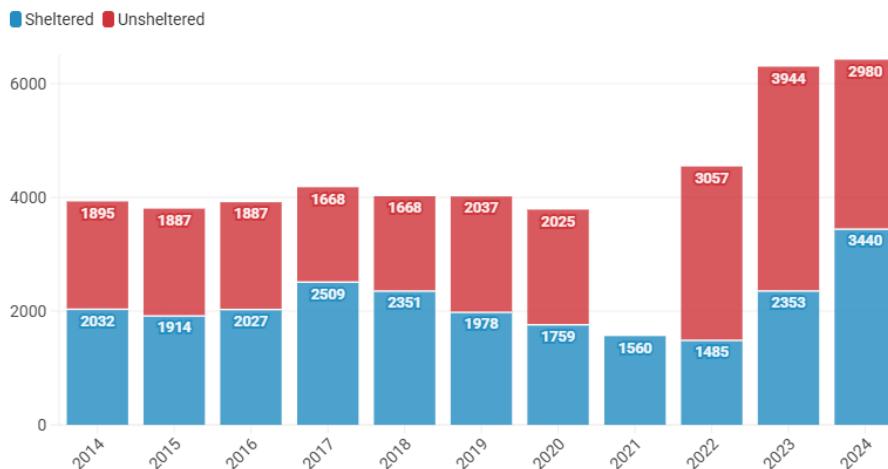
In each of these cities — Los Angeles, Portland, and San Francisco — the housing first ethos has managed to get more people into housing, but it has not reduced the overall number of homeless individuals.

Front Range Work First Results

Cities like Aurora and Colorado Springs have explored alternatives to the housing first approach. These programs directly address the root causes of homelessness rather than providing unconditional housing.

FIGURE 9

Portland, Gresham/Multnomah County CoC PIT Count by Year

■ Sheltered ■ Unsheltered

Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

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FIGURE 10

San Francisco CoC PIT Count by Year
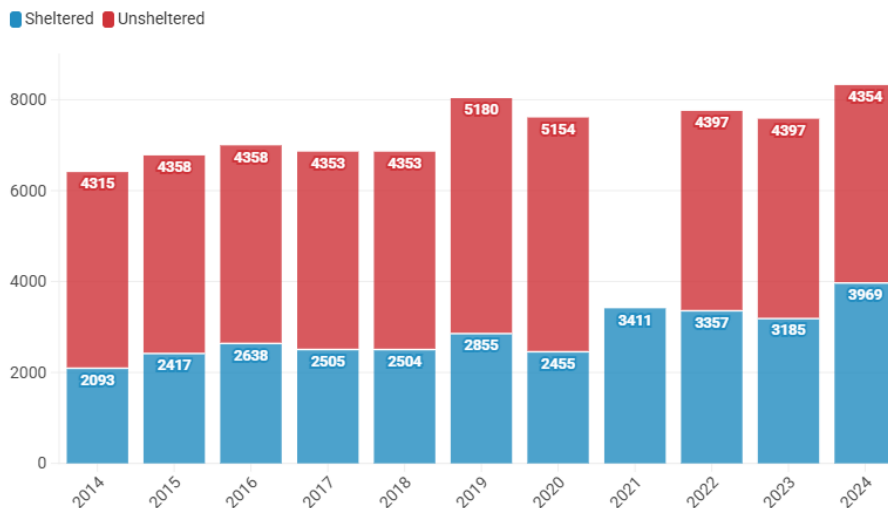
■ Sheltered ■ Unsheltered

Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

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The Aurora Regional Navigation Campus (ARNC) exemplifies a work first approach, which combines housing with mandatory participation in addiction recovery, mental health treatment, and workforce development programs. This program is under development, so it has not yet had a chance to affect homelessness counts. The need for it is clear, however. In 2024, there were 697 people in Aurora experiencing homelessness, according to the Metro Denver Homelessness Initiative (MDHI).

Figure 11 breaks this number down by category. The number of unsheltered individuals doubled between 2023 and 2024, from 163 to 326. The number of homeless individuals in Aurora in transitional housing increased by 12, from 88 to 100, while the number of homeless individuals in emergency shelters actually declined, falling from 321 in 2023 to 271 in 2024.

A city with a more established work first program (30+ years) has seen homelessness decrease. In El Paso County, home to Colorado Springs, there were 1,146 homeless individuals in 2024, according to MDHI's PIT count. That number was 12% lower than 2023. The change was largely driven by a decrease in the unsheltered population, which fell by 30.7%.

FIGURE 11

Aurora Point in Time Count by Year Subcategory
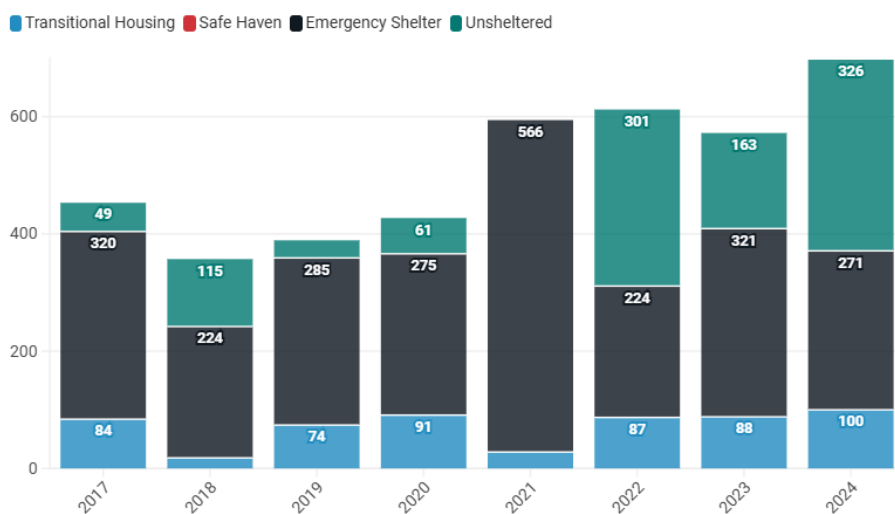
Source: MDHI PIT Count

Over the last several years, Colorado Springs' homeless population has been on a much different trajectory than most other cities on the Front Range. In contrast to the Denver metro area, for example, the Colorado Springs homeless population is stable and the unsheltered population is rapidly decreasing.

The success of the Colorado Springs model lies in its structured, tiered approach, which is designed to progressively move individuals from homelessness to self-sufficiency. The model begins with tier one: emergency shelter, which aims to get people off the streets immediately. In this phase, individuals have access to a basic overnight cot and a light breakfast. However, the expectation is clear — the emergency shelter is only the first step. To move forward, individuals must demonstrate a commitment to achieving self-sufficiency.

Tier two is transitional housing. In this phase, individuals enter semi-private living arrangements and are required to actively engage in programs tailored to address their specific needs. This requirement could involve workforce development, addiction recovery, mental health treatment, or a combination of these elements. The goal is to provide the support necessary to empower individuals to build stability and develop skills for independent living.

The third and final phase is advanced transitional housing. Participants in this phase typically have re-entered the workforce and continue to work toward self-sufficiency through ongoing treatment, job training, or skill development. Housing in this phase is more private, providing a stable environment for continued growth as individuals work toward transitioning to affordable or market-rate housing.

The Colorado Springs model is built around clear expectations and accountability. Movement through the tiers is contingent upon active participation and demonstrated progress, ensuring resources are directed toward people committed to the path of recovery and independence. This structured, tiered approach inspired Aurora's strategy. It is the basis for the Aurora Regional Navigation Campus, which will create a clear pathway for people experiencing homelessness to move from being unhoused to achieving self-sufficiency.

FIGURE 12

El Paso PIT 2017-2024

■ Transitional Housing ■ Safe Haven ■ Emergency Shelter ■ Unsheltered
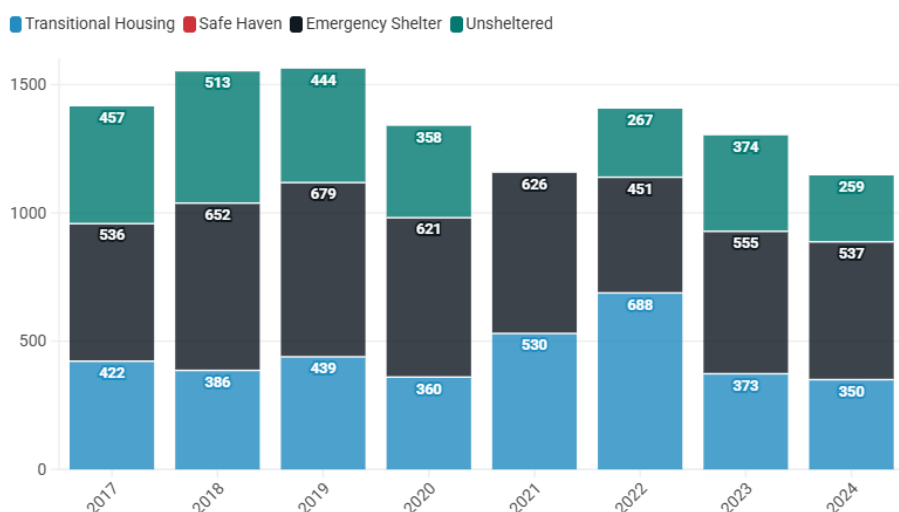
National Work First Results

One of the most successful work first/treatment models is San Antonio, Texas's Haven for Hope program, which served as a model for Colorado Springs. With a $20 million annual budget, Haven for Hope provides shelter and wraparound services to about 1,700 people a day on its 22-acre campus. Instead of following a traditional housing first model, Haven for Hope requires individuals to participate in treatment, job training, and other support programs as a condition for receiving shelter and long-term assistance.
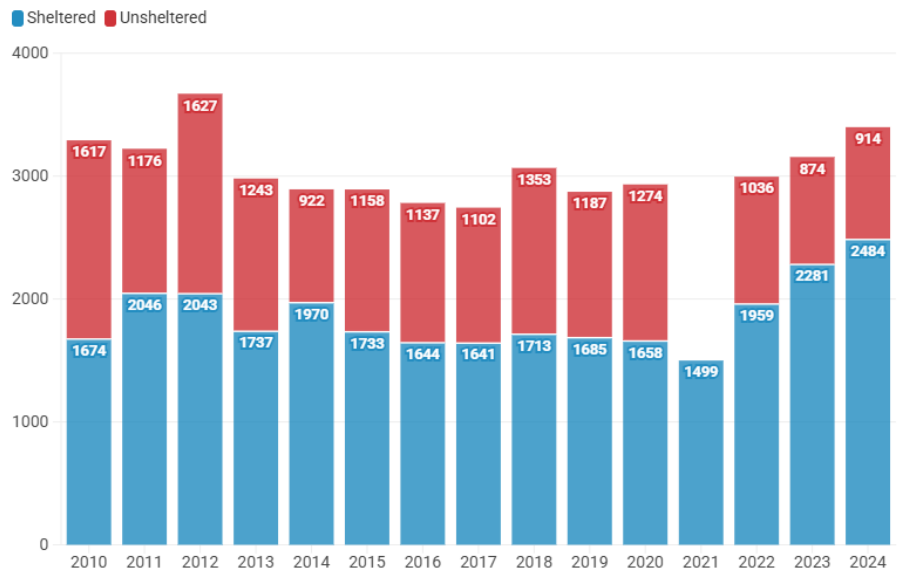
Since Haven for Hope opened in 2010, San Antonio has experienced a 77% reduction in unsheltered homelessness in the downtown area. In the entire San Antonio Continuum-of-Care area, unsheltered homeless fell 43% from 2010 to 2024. Accounting for both sheltered and unsheltered homeless, the total population of unhoused individuals has risen 16% between 2020 and 2024. In contrast, during the same time period, total Denver metro homelessness increased 63%.

The Haven for Hope program offers:

- **A Comprehensive Campus Approach:** A 22-acre campus provides access to shelter, mental health treatment, substance abuse recovery, job training, and workforce reentry programs in one location.

- **Work and Treatment Requirements:** Individuals must participate in recovery programs, job training, or employment as a step toward independent living.

- **Collaboration with Law Enforcement:** Instead of allowing unsanctioned encampments, the city directs homeless individuals to the campus so they can receive structured support.

- **Job Placement Success:** The program has successfully transitioned many participants into employment and stable housing after completing treatment or job training.

FIGURE 13

San Antonio/Bexar County PIT Count by Year

Sheltered ■ Unsheltered

Year	Sheltered	Unsheltered
2010	1674	1617
2011	2046	1176
2012	2043	1627
2013	1737	1243
2014	1970	922
2015	1733	1158
2016	1644	1137
2017	1641	1102
2018	1713	1353
2019	1685	1187
2020	1658	1274
2021	1499	
2022	1959	1036
2023	2281	874
2024	2484	914

HOUSING POINT-IN-TIME COUNT

Denver's homelessness problem has persisted even though the city has more beds. HUD's Housing Inventory Count (HIC) offers a count of emergency shelter, safe haven, transitional shelter, permanent supportive housing, rapid re-housing, and other permanent housing. As Figure 13 shows, Denver's total housing inventory increased 4,748, or 32%, from 2019 to 2024 to 19,375 beds. The number of available beds has risen 98% since 2019.

FIGURE 14

Denver Metro Housing Inventory and Point-In-Time Counts
2016-2024

Source: CoC Housing Inventory Count Reports
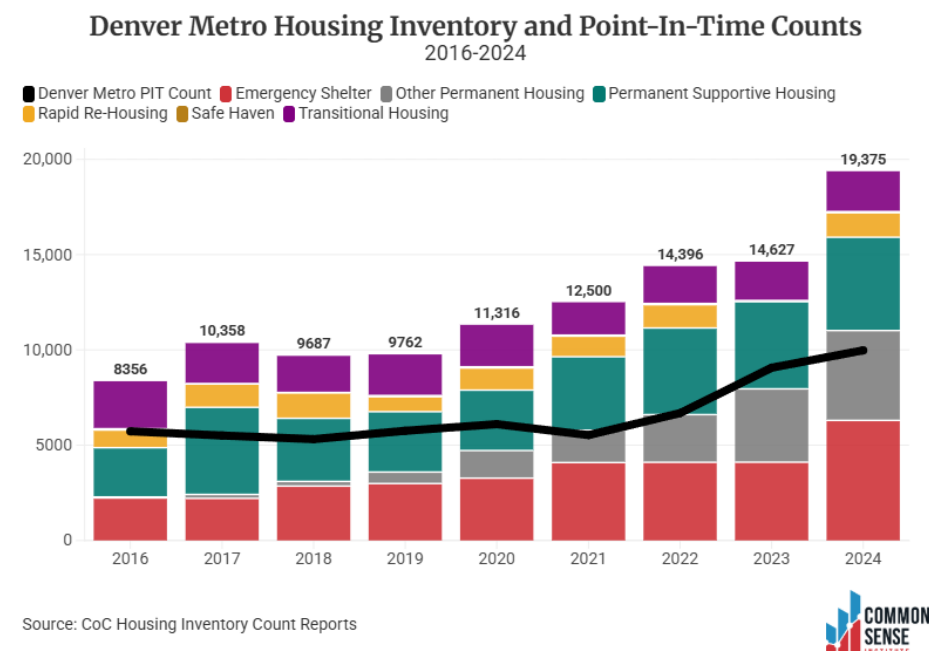
FEDERAL, STATE, AND LOCAL SPENDING ON HOMELESSNESS

Homelessness is a significant burden on taxpayers. Leveraging federal, state, local, and nonprofit funding, Denver, Boulder, and Aurora spent a total of $405 million on homelessness initiatives and measures in FY 2023. As noted earlier in this report, Denver's total spending is largely unknown since the city auditor determined the city cannot account for large portions of the spending. Much of this funding came from HUD. The department allocated $40 million to the state for homelessness grants and programs in FY 2023. State departments, including the Department of Human Services and the Department of Local Affairs (DOLA), spent $14 million on homelessness initiatives while nonprofit organizations spent $272 million. At the local level, Denver spent $65 million on homelessness, Aurora $5.7 million, and Boulder $7.7 million.

Nonprofit funding information for FY 2024 is not yet available. However, homelessness expenditures from federal grants and state and local funding totaled $213 million during that fiscal year. If nonprofit funding remained at its level from the year prior, total spending would have increased substantially in FY 2024. Federal awards and project grants from HUD totaled $44 million last fiscal year while the Colorado Department of Human Services and the DOLA appropriated $17 million. Denver spent $138 million in FY 2024 while Aurora spent $5.3 million, and Boulder allocated $9.8 million.

HUD Grants and Awards

In FY 2023, Colorado ranked third behind Arizona and California among all U.S. states in terms of federal grant dollars awarded per homelessness project. Colorado received $39,835,760, or an average of $766,072 per each of its 52 projects. That number was 110%, $403,000, more per grant than the national average grant of $363,000.

Despite receiving a high amount per project, Colorado's federal funding per homeless person ranked 44th among U.S. states. Federal funding amounted to $2,759 per homeless person, with a PIT homeless population of 14,439. The national average was $6,192, meaning Colorado received 55%, or $3,433 less than the national average.

These trends continued in FY 2024. Colorado received $43,671,439 in federal grants for an average of $839,835 per project, ranking it 5th in the nation. The national per project average was $439,524, meaning Colorado received 91%, or $400,311, more per project.

Colorado had 18,715 homeless individuals in 2024, which meant the state received $2,333.50 per homeless resident, ranking it 47th among U.S. states. In 2024, the average federal funding amount per homeless individual was $6,435.27. Colorado received $4,101.77, or about 65% less per homeless person than the nationwide average.

Denver Spending

In its FY 2023 budget, the city of Denver allocated $65,083,671 to address homelessness. Of this sum, $23,365,586 was appropriated from the Department of Housing Stability (DHS). The remaining $41,718,085 was allocated to DHS's special resource fund, which also included Homeless Services Donations ($4,139), the Homeless Services Fund ($59,936), and the Homeless Shelter Utility Support program ($275,828).

In 2024, the total allocation jumped to $137,939,873. DHS spent $25,366,075 on homelessness resolution. The department's special resource fund appropriated $111,741,906 to homelessness resolution, $460,000 to Homeless Services Donations, $109,392 to the Homeless Services Fund, and $262,500 to the Homeless Shelter and Utility Support program.

Aurora Spending

In FY 2023, Aurora spent $5,736,974 to address homelessness.

In FY 2024, that number fell by nearly $500,000 to $5,295,247. Just under $93,000 went to Aurora's newly formed Housing, Employment, Addiction, Recovery, and Teamwork (HEART) Court, which provides homeless individuals charged with non-violent offenses with alternatives to incarceration such as mental health treatment and drug rehabilitation.

Boulder Spending

In FY 2023, Boulder spent $7,700,477 to address homelessness. The largest expenditures were $1,800,701 for recovery housing, $921,875 for permanent supportive housing, and $714,545 for Eviction Prevention and Rental Assistance Services (EPRAS).

In FY 2024, Boulder spent $9,790,880, including $1,412,386 for Day Services Center Operations, $1,333,428 for the EPRAS program, and $1,216,573 for short-term recuperative care.
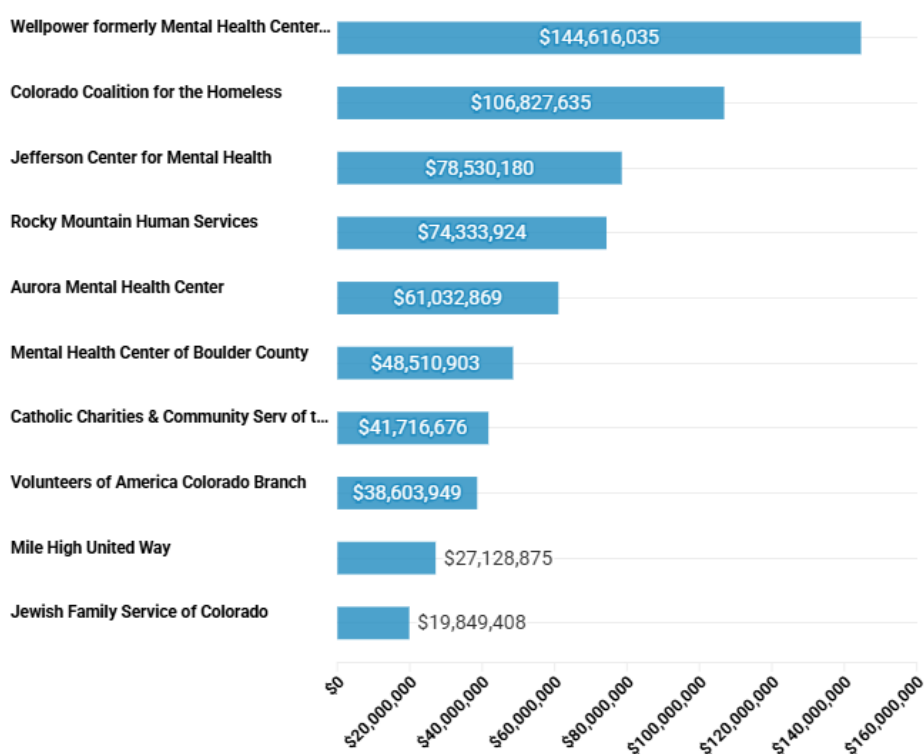
NONPROFIT SPENDING

We determined nonprofit spending based on organizations' 990 tax forms.

From the organizations CSI examined — Wellpower, the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless, Jefferson Center for Mental Health, Rocky Mountain Human Services, Aurora Mental Health Center, the Mental Health Center of Boulder County, Catholic Charities, Volunteers of America Colorado Branch, Mile High United Way, and Jewish Family Service of Colorado — Aurora was the beneficiary of the largest share of nonprofit spending on homelessness in fiscal year 2023, followed by Denver. In total, nonprofits in the Denver area spent a total of $179 million in calendar year 2023.

At around 31%, program services accounted for most of the nonprofit spending. Management and general expenses also received significant funding.

FIGURE 15

Total Functional Expenses Among the 10 Largest Denver Homeless Non-Profits

Organization	Total Functional Expenses
Wellpower formerly Mental Health Center...	$144,616,035
Colorado Coalition for the Homeless	$106,827,635
Jefferson Center for Mental Health	$78,530,180
Rocky Mountain Human Services	$74,333,924
Aurora Mental Health Center	$61,032,869
Mental Health Center of Boulder County	$48,510,903
Catholic Charities & Community Serv of t...	$41,716,676
Volunteers of America Colorado Branch	$38,603,949
Mile High United Way	$27,128,875
Jewish Family Service of Colorado	$19,849,408

Source: IRS 990 forms

RECOMMENDATIONS

While housing first policies are a relatively recent focus, they have been adopted widely, offering a significant opportunity to track their results. Based on our research, it is clear these policies have not meaningfully reduced the overall number of homeless individuals in the cities where they have been implemented.

Federal policymakers should allow HUD to exercise flexibility with homelessness grants so that cities and state can explore different approaches. For example, allowing federal homelessness dollars to be distributed through flexible block grants would better empower states and municipalities to experiment with alternatives to housing first.

Additionally, instead of simply tracking the number of people with roofs over their heads, policymakers and advocates should aim to determine the number of people who achieved self-sufficiency. They also should examine data surrounding addiction, mental health stabilization, and employment gains.

In Denver, the administration needs to thoroughly account for homelessness spending since the birth of the All In Mile High program. Budgetary discipline is a critical element for any program. Without it, public trust will erode, and it will be impossible to determine whether dollars spent are worth the outcomes experienced. City leaders also should encourage private-public partnerships such as Step Denver and Ready Work, Denver area programs which prioritize sobriety and employment assistance. Encouraging similar partnerships nationwide can amplify the impact of public dollars.

BOTTOM LINE

The federal, state, and local commitment to housing first policies speaks to a deep concern for the welfare and public safety of citizens. However, concern for welfare need not come in a single flavor. An effective mitigation of homelessness should produce self-sufficiency, not solely shelter, particularly since homelessness in the Denver metro is both costly and dangerous.

Housing first policies have not reduced the number of homeless individuals in many of the cities practicing them, though they have moved many people from unsheltered spaces to sheltered spaces. Because results have not been demonstrated, federal agencies and other public leaders must loosen funding so that it can be used to support approaches that prioritize self-sufficiency. Leaders also should practice stringent data tracking to ensure program effectiveness can be measured and understood by the taxpaying public.

REFERENCES

i   https://www.commonsenseinstituteus.org/colorado/research/housing-and-our-community/a-snapshot-of-the-metro-denver-homeless-ecosystem-in-2023

ii   FY 22-23 CPD v2.xlsx