



*2022 COMMUNITY CHECK IN
SUPPLEMENT*

Community Perspectives on Denver's
Mental Health & Substance Misuse Needs
November 2022

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OVERVIEW

Caring for Denver Foundation is a taxpayer funded, nonprofit organization addressing Denver’s mental health and substance misuse needs. Community input and collaboration guide its work. This is a requirement of Caring for Denver’s [founding ordinance](#), and critical to ensuring its funds are deployed effectively.

In 2022, Caring for Denver engaged [HadaNōu Collective](#), to co-design a process for gathering insights from the Denver community.

This resulted in a city-wide engagement effort—a *Community Check In*—comprised of targeted conversations with community members and a broad reaching survey. These tools provide insight into the community’s perspectives on mental health and substance misuse related to Caring for Denver’s founding ordinance and funding priorities.

This engagement was conducted from May 2022 to October 2022.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT QUESTIONS

Community conversations and surveys were focused on responses to the following questions:

Caring for Denver’s Founding Ordinance

- Caring for Denver’s [founding ordinance](#) covers a range of topics related to mental health and substance misuse. What parts of the ordinance feel most important to the Denver community now? Why?

Funding priorities

- Which of Caring for Denver’s established funding areas (Alternatives to Jail, Care Provision, Community-Centered Solutions, Youth) feel most critical right now? Why?

Lived experience

- What is going well or not going well with Denver's mental health and substance misuse systems?

Current Environment

- What still holds true related to Denver’s mental health and substance misuse needs?
- How has Denver’s mental health and substance misuse needs changed over the last few years?

METHODOLOGY

The table below summarizes data collection activities and sample sizes by activity and stakeholder.

Data Collection Activity	Participant type	Response / Sample Size
Community Survey A ten-minute survey offered in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese. Respondents were offered the option to enter for a \$25 gift card incentive.	Denver community members.	1,029 surveys

<p>Community Conversations In person and online focus groups aligned with questions from the survey. Participants were provided food, childcare, or other resources as requested by the hosting organization.</p>	<p>Targeted stakeholder populations and community members with lived experience related to mental health or substance misuse.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 321 individuals at 17 in-person conversations (2 in Spanish) • 426 individuals at 3 online conversations (1 in Spanish)
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OUTREACH

To ensure broad participation with diverse, equitable representation throughout Denver, several outreach tactics were deployed, including:

- A landing page on the Caring for Denver website.
- A press release and pitches to Denver media outlets.
- A targeted digital ad campaign.
- Invitations to provider organizations, city council members, stakeholders, and partners to take and share the survey or host a community conversation.
- A share packet (in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese) with text and images for businesses, organizations, and city agencies to distribute through their own newsletters and social media.
- Flyers in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese posted in public areas, including Denver libraries, recreation centers, and the Denver Museum of Nature and Science.
- Tabling events throughout Denver to promote survey participation.

DEMOGRAPHICS

The survey reached every neighborhood in Denver and allowed respondents to self-identify their demographic information. For detailed information about how this breaks down by neighborhood, See [Appendix A](#).

Demographics were not collected nor assumed at community conversations to ensure a safe space and enough time for community members to share their perspectives. However, these conversations targeted populations with lived experience and those that were less represented within the survey. Several community group types participated, including:

- Latino/a/x communities
- People who've experienced homelessness or housing instability
- People in recovery from alcohol or substance misuse
- People who have interacted with the justice system
- Youth
- Promotoras and community health providers
- Businesses

Race

Survey respondents reflected Denver's racial demographics except for Latino/a/x populations, which were represented in the community conversations.

OVERVIEW

Age

Survey respondents ranged in age from under 18 to 75 or older, with most respondents between the ages of 27 to 44.

Experience

Most respondents (71%) either knew someone with mental health or substance misuse challenges or experienced these challenges themselves.

SUMMARY

QUESTIONS	COMMUNITY RESPONSE
Caring for Denver’s Founding Ordinance	
<p>Caring for Denver’s founding ordinance covers a range of topics related to mental health and substance misuse. What parts of the ordinance feel most important to the Denver community now? Why?</p>	<p><i>All ordinance areas are connected, and mental health is the key driver.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In person and online, most community members highlighted the interconnections between ordinance areas and how all are essential for increasing access, resources, and recovery. • There was broad sentiment that mental health is at the root of each ordinance area. • Many highlighted the increased need to address substance misuse, because it feels more visible in their lives and communities. • They also shared that homelessness is intricately linked to mental health and substance misuse and embedding these services within housing supports is important. • Finally, they emphasized that economic and social stress has made it critical to connect people to mental health resources and long-term recovery support across all ordinance areas to prevent further instability and help our communities thrive. <p style="text-align: right;"><READ MORE></p>
Funding Priorities	
<p>Which of Caring for Denver’s established funding areas (Alternatives to Jail, Care Provision, Community-Centered Solutions, Youth) feel most critical right now and why?</p>	<p><i>The funding areas still resonate, and Youth and Community-Centered Solutions feel most critical now.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community members felt that all of Caring for Denver's funding areas are still important. • The majority of community members identified Youth as a top priority to prevent mental health and substance misuse issues before they start and create a healthier future for Denver. • The majority of community members also noted the importance of Community-Centered Solutions for meeting the immediate and unique needs of their own communities. <p style="text-align: right;"><READ MORE></p>

QUESTIONS	COMMUNITY RESPONSE
Lived Experience	
<p>What is going well or not going well with Denver's mental health and substance misuse systems?</p>	<p><i>The increase in peer supports and partnerships between police and mental health responders are going well, but it is still difficult to access care.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In conversations, many community members shared that peers, people who have navigated mental health or substance challenges themselves, were critical to helping them recover and heal. • On the survey, Community members are excited about approaches like STAR (Support Team Assisted Response) and co-responders, that provide mental health supports instead of or in addition to police responses. • Both groups pointed out the difficulty in accessing care due to the resources (time, cost/insurance, referrals) necessary to do so. <p style="text-align: right;"><READ MORE></p>
Community Context	
<p>What still holds true related to Denver's mental health and substance misuse needs?</p>	<p><i>Stigma, a lack of long-term recovery options, and difficulty accessing care still create barriers to mental health and substance misuse care.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While there is increased awareness and willingness for community members to seek help as an effect of COVID, layered stigmas and cultural norms still make it hard to recognize and ask for help, or for people to receive it. • More care options are available, but there is still a need for long-term healing and recovery supports between crisis and stabilization. <p style="text-align: right;"><READ MORE></p>
<p>How has Denver's mental health and substance misuse needs changed over the last few years?</p>	<p><i>Community members are under more economic and social stress, creating a higher demand for care, and more difficulty finding help that fits individual needs, especially in communities of color.</i></p>

QUESTIONS	COMMUNITY RESPONSE
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The struggle and need to prioritize basic needs has made it harder for individuals and families to recognize, focus on, or address mental health and substance misuse challenges.• There is more demand for services, and those that are accessing services are experiencing delays in getting care or approaches that aren't relevant or accessible to their cultures and identities.• Finally, community members talked about the importance of accountability in the treatment of and recovery from mental health and substance misuse challenges. <p style="text-align: right;"><READ MORE></p>

What parts of the ordinance feel most important to the Denver community now?

All ordinance areas are connected, and mental health is the key driver.

ORDINANCE AREAS

In 2018, Denver residents voted to use tax dollars to support Denver by funding:

- Mental health issues, AND
- Opioid and substance misuse; AND
- Suicide prevention; AND
- Resources that reduce homelessness and improve long-term recovery from mental health and substance misuse needs.

In person and online, most community members highlighted the interconnections between ordinance areas and how **all are essential** to a holistic, sustainable approach to mental health and substance misuse challenges in Denver.

“Each of these topics go hand-in-hand and they are all very important from mental health to suicide prevention and substance misuse. I love the fact that everything is in a group to tackle this issue as a whole.”

There was broad sentiment that **mental health is at the root** of each ordinance area. Most community members felt that addressing mental health is key to preventing and improving

Denver’s challenges with substance misuse, homelessness, and suicide.

“Many of my colleagues, friends, clients, and family struggle with mental health and use substances to help feel better. I long for a day when mental health is handled with dignity and becomes part of normal wellness checkups. So many things could be addressed as a preventative versus in the back end when lives are spiraling.”

Many also highlighted the **increased need to address substance misuse**, because it feels more visible in their lives and communities. Particularly in conversations, community members shared that opioid and substance misuse is significantly more visible and were adamant that youth need help to prevent use or reduce further harm.

“I’ve never seen anything like this, and I’ve been in the drug scene for 20 years. I ride the light rail and bus twice a day and there’s so much drug use. People are using in the open.”

They also shared that **homelessness is intricately linked to mental health and substance misuse** and embedding these services within housing supports is important.

“We need housing that provides support and wrap-around services to those needing access and connection to resources. I think these services need to focus on mental health and substance misuse.”

Finally, they emphasized that economic and social stress has made it **critical to connect people to mental health resources and long-term recovery support** across all ordinance areas to help our communities heal and thrive.

“I think providing resources for the long-term that address the many interconnected issues to mental health and substance misuse—including homelessness, suicidal ideation, violence, etc.—is a key to really moving the needle on these issues. A community-based approach to all these issues seems to make the most sense.”

Which of Caring for Denver's established funding areas (Alternatives to Jail, Care Provision, Community-Centered Solutions, Youth) feel most critical right now?

The funding areas still resonate, and Youth and Community-Centered Solutions feel most critical now.

Community members felt that all of Caring for Denver's funding areas are **still important**. Many commented that prioritizing was a difficult task as all should be addressed.

"Every single one is equally important. Every priority is interconnected. It is very difficult to put one over the other. I see these priorities just pieces of the puzzle. What is needed is lifting how all are interconnected."

The majority of community members **identified Youth as a top priority** to prevent mental health and substance misuse issues before they start and create a healthier future for Denver.

"Youth are our future and I think we need to prioritize their wellbeing to model what that can look like and to help us imagine how we can do this for other marginalized groups."

Some, however, noted youth already have a significant amount of funding and resources, or that they can be served under Caring for Denver's other funding areas.

The majority of community members also noted the **importance of Community-Centered Solutions for meeting the immediate and unique needs** of their own communities. Community services are trusted, easier to access, and often more cost effective.

"Folks, especially students, need support in the moment in a place that is familiar and filled with relationships - most folks don't lean into working with strangers easily. Having folks get what they need where they may already be engaged matters. For youth and adults."

However, a smaller group mentioned clinical interventions may be timelier and more effective given the current severity of needs.

Community members saw **Care Provision** as a less urgent need because they perceive care providers as having the most resources already available, compared to youth and communities. However, those that ranked Care Provision higher noted the importance of combating provider staffing shortages and staff burnout related to COVID and worsening behavioral healthcare needs.

"I ranked Care Provision the lowest not because I don't think it's important, but I think that Care Provision happens within the context of the other priorities, especially community-based services, and alternatives to jail."

Community members were least familiar with **Alternatives to Jail** and many ranked it lower because they **didn't know enough about it** or felt it wasn't relevant to their own needs. Some ranked it low because they felt it **is more difficult to address and reaches a smaller population**. Others ranked it higher noting that the sheer numbers of people who need mental health and substance misuse supports

INSIGHTS: Funding Priorities

within the justice system, as well as the system's current inability to address these needs are major reasons for prioritizing it.

“This is a very high-need population that is very expensive to see marginal impact. We need to invest now to prevent jail down the road (not spend all of our money adding one drop to the jail bucket).”

What is going well or not going well with Denver's mental health and substance misuse systems?

The increase in peer supports and partnerships between police and mental health responders are going well, but it is still difficult to access care.

In conversations, many community members with lived experience shared that **peers**, people who have navigated mental health or substance challenges themselves, **were critical to helping them recover and heal**.

“What has been working is to have someone there listening and saying, ‘Hey I’ve been there, and I know the way.’ Someone that’s been through hell and back.”

On the survey, **community members are excited about approaches like STAR** (Support Team Assisted Response) **and co-responders**, that provide mental health supports instead of or in addition to police responses. Community members want to see the continuation and expansion of these and similar programs with more lived experience and diversity in staff.

“I’m a caregiver for a person with a mental illness. The STAR program could have really helped me and the person I care for. Our experience years ago with police response was traumatizing, so I’m so grateful to know this program is in place for others.”

Both groups pointed out the **difficulty in accessing care** due to the resources (time, cost/insurance, referrals) necessary to do so. There is a sense of privilege associated with being able to connect to services on your own, and a hierarchy of people that can afford mental health services: 1) those on Medicaid that have free access, 2) those who can afford it out of pocket, and 3) those who have private insurance that can no longer afford services once they’re reached their plan limits.

“It’s not easy getting financial support. Even with insurance, having copayments can get expensive. Having multiple members of the family needing services can add up. It’s hard as a parent having to decide who of your children has priority for services, not to mention having to ignore our personal mental health.”

What still holds true related to Denver’s mental health and substance misuse needs?

Stigma, a lack of long-term recovery options, and difficulty accessing care still create barriers to mental health and substance misuse care.

While there is increased awareness and willingness for community members to seek help as an effect of COVID, layered **stigmas and cultural norms still make it hard to recognize and ask for help, or for people to receive the help they need.**

Community members with lived experience of mental health or substance misuse challenges often talked about the ways stigma affects how they are treated.

“I would like to see more organizations and businesses be recovery friendly because that’s part of what makes it hard for people to hold jobs.”

Communities of color shared a desire for tailored education to normalize seeking help for their specific cultural norms. They stressed the importance of educating allies and **increasing awareness of existing resources to normalize seeking help** within Denver’s communities.

“Bottom line - there are services and resources available. But I would have to go and knock on the door and find them. They aren’t coming to me. You have to encourage people and let them know where services and resources are.”

More care options are available, but there is **still a need for long-term healing and recovery supports between crisis and stabilization.** Many community members shared that people with chronic or crisis needs can’t get services, and transitions are rocky. They want more opportunities for residential-based care, longer-term inpatient care, transition services, co-located services, and wrap-around interventions.

“We need to focus on community members having access to long-term support. It is not a quick fix.”

It has always been **difficult to access care**, and increased demand has intensified needs. Community members want **more immediate care in trusted community spaces** (like schools, community centers, and walk-in clinics) or online.

“There are a lot of individuals who are seeking mental health and substance misuse services and are unable to access due to cost, wait times, language barriers, and lack of culturally responsive providers of color.”

Especially for communities of color, more culturally relevant, community-based care and promotion of existing services should be prioritized. They stressed the need to **recognize and support established cultural and community care systems.** These resources can often provide earlier and more relevant connections to recovery and healing.

“The Latinx community, among other sub-populations of Denver are not as trusting of treatment/outpatient support, so we need to do much more to create pipelines of access to mental health professions and approach

treatment in more innovative ways to make sure we are reaching all pockets of our community, including the most vulnerable.”

How has Denver’s mental health and substance misuse needs changed over the last few years? What should be done to address these needs?

Community members are under more economic and social stress, creating a higher demand for care, and more difficulty finding help that fits individual needs, especially in communities of color.

The struggle and need to prioritize basic needs has made it **harder for individuals and families to recognize, focus on, or address mental health and substance misuse challenges**. Community members emphasized a **need for mental health and substance misuse services to be integrated or co-located with other types of help**, particularly housing support.

In conversations with communities of color, there was an overwhelming sentiment that parents are feeling **increased economic pressure and isolation from social systems** (like education and health) that were not built for them. They often run into linguistic and financial barriers when trying to access resources, which leaves them feeling stuck and helpless. They frequently talked about the **need for more intergenerational strategies** to help families understand how to care and advocate for themselves and each other.

“As parents we don’t know how to support them, so they need more peer support, but we also need support for the parents and the family so we can help them.”

Those that are accessing services are experiencing **delays in getting care or approaches that aren’t relevant or accessible** to their cultures and identities. They relayed that trust and cultural norms play a significant role in whether the care offered is useful, and significantly affects whether someone wants to engage in care.

“The wait for a call back from a therapist is too long, if ever received. There is a lack of Black therapists in general and specifically Black male therapists. Appointments are months out. Mental health is the priority. Without stable and consistent mental care, nothing else is sustainable.”

Community members want and need care that reflects their values, cultures, and identities, whether it is youth, communities of color, LGBTQIA+, older adults, or people with disabilities. They continue to emphasize the need for more care navigators, therapists, and services that **reflect and affirm their cultures and experiences**.

“We need more people that understand our culture, understand the person in front of them, and need more service providers because it is really difficult to find help when you need it.”

They also shared the importance of validating existing community networks and support, particularly in cultures that emphasize community and family.

Finally, community members talked about the **importance of accountability in the treatment** of and recovery from substance misuse and mental health challenges. For some, their responses pointed to a perspective that these issues are not an excuse for behaviors that put themselves or others at risk. Others, including those with lived experience, noted how accountability can both encourage motivation to seek treatment as well as help people build the skills needed to live healthy. Many want residential centers to reinforce accountability and provide basic life skills while providing care.

“As uncompassionate as this will sound, (and I was a homeless person suffering from the disease of addiction for two years) my experience is that people make changes in their lives when the consequences get serious enough for them to WANT to change. Not have to change, or maybe change, or be enabled to continue the cycle of addiction. Jail is one of those consequences that will often motivate someone to seek recovery and change their life. It did for me.”

CONCLUSION

This report illustrates how community members are currently experiencing mental health and substance misuse care in Denver and provides insight into how Caring for Denver can support more impactful investments.

Some ways we can support communities right now include:

- Partnering with organizations who provide education, employment, and social supports to co-locate mental health, trauma, and substance misuse supports.
- Supporting and recognizing the crucial role of established community care systems
- Fostering more access points for stability and crisis, especially for youth and communities of color
- Recognizing access, and the nuances of access, as a priority for Denverites

NEXT STEPS

We plan to share these initial findings back out to the community to give them time to reflect and comment on what we've learned. We'll elevate key insights to other stakeholders working toward Denver's healing and recovery, and publish a final report including how we're weaving insights into our work in March.

LEARN MORE

Caring for Denver Foundation

Caring for Denver Foundation was founded and funded with overwhelming voter support to address Denver's mental health and substance misuse needs by growing community-informed solutions, dismantling stigma, and turning the community's desire to help into action. Guided by community input, the organization has funded more than \$98.3 million in the areas of alternatives to jail, care provision, community-centered solutions, youth, and special initiatives since it began. Learn more at www.Caring4Denver.org.

Neighborhoods

Every geographic community in Denver was represented in the survey responses, with higher responses coming from north and central Denver. The map below illustrates the representation of Denverites who participated in the survey by neighborhood and City Council District.

