

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.

In 2022, Caring for Denver conducted a city-wide engagement effort—a *Community Check In*—comprised of targeted conversations with community members and a broad-reaching survey. The graphic below outlines the timeline and process for this work.

This report summarizes community members' views on Caring for Denver's work, and their experiences of Denver's mental health and substance misuse challenges. We learned many important insights on how Caring for Denver can contribute to Denver's healing and recovery, including:

- 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

We also learned that there is a sense of anxiety that exists in all of Denver's communities. Economic and social stress are driving a higher need for mental health and substance misuse care. But more importantly, people are ready to talk about and seek help, especially if those services and resources reflect and affirm their cultures, identities, and values.

We are now sharing these insights back with the community so that we can build our next steps together.

We are deeply grateful for all of the community organizations who shared their time, space, and communities with us and to Denver for trusting us with their experiences. We are honored to work with you and committed to continuing the conversation.

With gratitude,



Lorez Meinhold, Executive Director
Caring for Denver Foundation



OUTREACH

- **Grantee communications** sharing the goals and timeline for the community engagement initiative ahead of public release
- **Digital ad campaign** targeting people 18-65+ who live within a 25-mile radius of Denver and underrepresented ZIP codes
- **Press releases and pitches** to Denver media to ensure broad reach
- **Flyers in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese** posted in libraries, recreation centers, businesses, and the Denver Museum of Nature and Science
- **Packets** for businesses, city agencies, and organizations to promote the survey and community conversations in their own locations, newsletters, and social media
- **Tabling at community events** to reach new, potentially underrepresented audiences



ENGAGEMENT

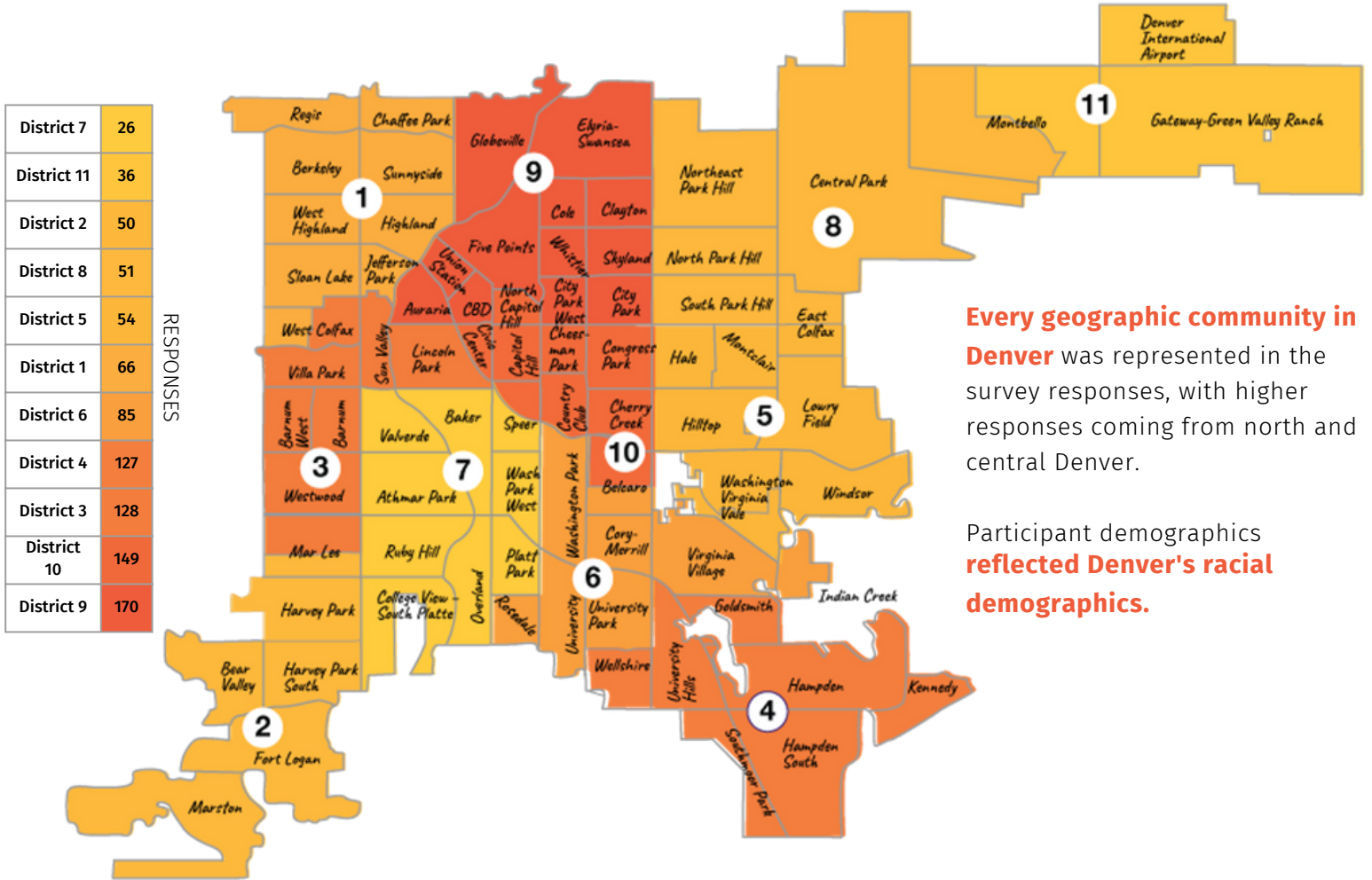
1,029 survey responses from Denver community members, including people who live, work, or get services or education in Denver

796 community members participated in community conversations in person and online to share their lived experiences

GOALS

- ✓ Engage a diverse group of voices new to Caring for Denver Foundation.
- ✓ Create accessible ways for individuals to engage in the process.
- ✓ Balance traditionally big and small voices in the process.
- ✓ Ensure the unhoused, people with lived experience, non-grantees, and businesses are represented





Every geographic community in Denver was represented in the survey responses, with higher responses coming from north and central Denver.

Participant demographics **reflected Denver's racial demographics.**

SUMMARY

Question themes:

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

Which of Caring for Denver's established funding areas feel most critical right now and why?

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

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?

Summarized Responses

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

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

The increase in peer supports and partnerships between police and mental health responders are going well; accessing care remains difficult.

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

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.

ORDINANCE

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

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

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

"Mental health must be addressed because, ultimately, that is part of the root cause of the other social issues of substance misuse, homelessness, etc."

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

When you think about what is happening in Denver now, what word or words from the text above feel most important to you?

- Why did you choose those words? What makes them the most important?



FUNDING AREAS

➤ Which of Caring for Denver's established funding areas feel most critical right now and why?

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

- Community members generally 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 intervene early and 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.

"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."

"We need to use places that are naturally occurring. Don't build a special center and home to help people. Let people go to regular places to get what they need, like in schools. It's less stigmatizing and saves money."



LIVED EXPERIENCE

➤ 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; accessing care remains difficult.

- 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.
- Those with lived experience pointed out the difficulty in accessing care due to the resources (time, cost, insurance barriers, referrals) necessary to do so. For those able to access care, many described positive experiences once they overcame access barriers.

“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.”

“Having multiple members of the family needing services can add up. It’s hard as a parent having to decide which of your children has priority for services, not to mention having to ignore our personal mental health.”



COMMUNITY CONTEXT

➤ 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 it.
- More care options are available, but there is still a need for long-term healing and recovery supports between crisis and stabilization.

“There needs to be more active outreach to combat stigma, and to align parents, youth, and the current understanding of good health.”

“A person can go to the hospital and receive medication and just get thrown back out onto the streets a few days later.”



COMMUNITY CONTEXT

➤ How has Denver's mental health and substance misuse needs changed over the last few years?

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 have 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 accessing services are experiencing delays in getting care or approaches that aren't relevant or accessible to their cultures and identities.
- Community members raised the importance of programs that have structure and accountability so that individuals can build their skills and capacity to maintain recovery.

"We need more clinicians - and not just someone who speaks Spanish but someone that understands our culture, tradition, needs, etc."

"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."





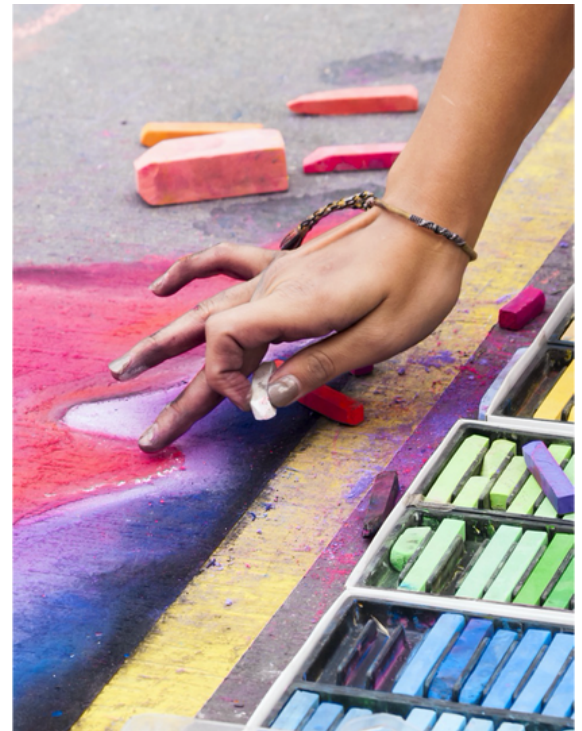
NEXT STEPS

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.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

for Caring for Denver

- Partner with organizations that provide education, employment, and social supports to co-locate mental health, trauma, and substance misuse supports
- Support and recognize the crucial role of community care systems
- Foster more options for care that fall between stability and crisis
- Recognize that access to care that fits people's identities, schedules, and resources is a priority for Denverites



ABOUT 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.