Caring For Denver Foundation is committed to learning both as a measure of progress and to guide our future actions. Deeply listening to our grantees and their expertise is part of this commitment.

Learning Briefs share back what we've learned and how grantees are helping us think about our work differently.

We are thankful to Alternatives to Jail grantees for their passion and honesty in helping lift up these important points of reflection.

## Overview

In July 2020, we established partnerships with 23 organizations to deliver programs that support alternatives to jail as a way to address the substance misuse and mental health needs of those currently or formally involved in Denver's criminal justice system or at risk of justice system involvement. These programs and projects are helping to support the community's request to (1) reduce entry, (2) reduce recidivism, and (3) increase post-release supports in community for persons experiencing mental health and/or substance misuse issues.[1]

This document is a high-level summary of key reflections from grantees, who participate in learning calls every six months to share their progress and provide feedback to us about the field.

> *In writing reports, a lot of times it starts to feel like clients are numbers. As a provider, having the space to talk to the funder we get the chance to explain and share how our clients are impacted and it is powerful.*
>
> — Grantee

[1] For more information on how each grantee is working towards these impact goals, see the Grantee Matrix at the end of this brief.

# KEY GRANTEE PROGRESS AREAS

During our six-month learning calls with grantees, they shared ways they are making grant progress.

## Hiring and Onboarding Staff

Hiring new case managers, peer navigators, therapists and clinicians, and program coordinators. Engaging new staff, particularly peer navigators, in learning their roles and defining and building new programs.

## Building Strategic Partnerships

Defining work practices and building relationships both within and across organizations. This includes establishing partnership agreements/Memorandums of Understanding and updating Human Resources policies to support new or expanded approaches to care.

## Screenings and Assessments

Prioritizing treatment planning, referrals, and supports. Expanding the use of strengths-based and client-first assessment approaches to put client priorities and motivations at the center of care.
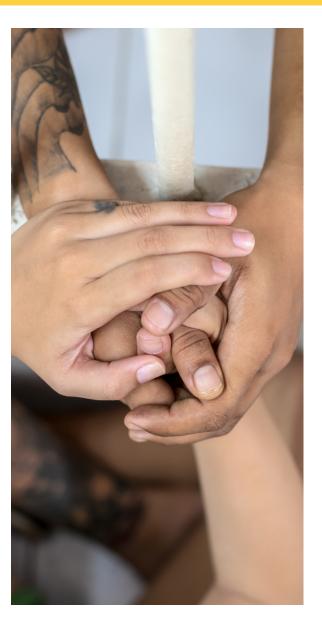
## Program Implementation

Expanding current services to provide holistic case management, adapting new or current programs to operate virtual supports in jails, detention centers and community, establishing and promoting restorative justice approaches, and beginning culturally-based supports (e.g., virtual sweat lodges and healing circles).

> " The fact that you all are...giving us width for experimenting and trying innovation and for understanding it won't always work out perfectly is great. Keep giving us that width, and we'll produce exceptional results. "
>
> – Grantee

Grantees also shared what is **hindering** and **helping** grant progress.

## Difficulty Hiring Peers / Lived Experience

Systems structures are hard to change, even when the change is supported. The field recognizes the importance of peers, but hiring peer navigators is difficult when policies disqualify candidates based on their experiences (e.g., on probation, no GED). Building strong partnerships between institutions and community nonprofits with more flexible hiring policies is one way to address this barrier, but building those partnerships takes considerable time, patience, and perseverance.
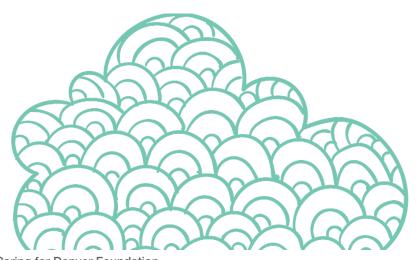
## Valued Workforce

Hiring the "right" staff (from the community, with lived experience, and flexibility and openness to trying new things) and valuing them (providing tools and resources for self-care) is helping staff survive the pandemic, build more sustainable programs, and develop better relationships with clients.

**Our insights for grantmaking:** In funding decisions, account for the extra time, resources, and relationship-building that are required for supporting lived experience — a valued community approach.

Funding organizations that are invested in the mental health and well being of their own staff allows them to build more sustainable approaches to care.

> We know engagement goes through the roof when it's lived experience doing the support... This isn't just a volunteer position. A livable wage needs to be associated with this work.
>
> — Grantee

### Duplicate Data Tracking Systems

Limits to data sharing among agencies is a barrier. Multiple tracking systems and disconnected agency practices cause staff inefficiencies (e.g., entering duplicate data, gaps or duplications in referrals), and leave clients without a comprehensive plan that often leads to "falling through the cracks".

### Continuity of Care

Working together with other organizations to provide streamlined services, offer more relevant supports, and ensure "warm hand-offs" during client transitions is helping grantees make more effective referrals and ultimately support better client outcomes long term. Established relationships between city institutions and community nonprofits are also helping to support better understanding and increased use of community-based care for those involved with the criminal justice system.

**Our insights for grantmaking:** Prioritize supporting projects that break down silos and can demonstrate more collaborative approaches to care. Organizations with trusted client and community partnerships are more likely to be successful.

We have a role in facilitating partnerships and awareness of resources, especially across city agencies and community nonprofits.

### Institutionalized Thinking/Acting

Grantees are implementing novel approaches that require the justice system and the community to think differently about mental health and substance misuse approaches. It takes time and the right communications to build awareness about alternatives and to help people trust new ways of engaging.

### Shifting Mindsets

Meeting people where they are with information that shows alternative approaches work can build awareness. Sharing data and success stories has helped increase acceptance and build champions within institutions and the community.

**Our insights for grantmaking:** Funding innovative and community-tested solutions is important, and grantees also need support in "making the case" for/promoting the evidence of their success for greater understanding and buy-in across a diversity of stakeholders.

## Difficulty Meeting Basic Needs

Immediate supports like shelter, food, clothing and transportation lay the foundation for long-term stability for clients. With basic needs met, people have time and resources to focus on mental health and substance use challenges. However, these are often the most difficult things to find funding for. COVID-19 exacerbated these needs.

## Client-Centered & Empowerment-Based Care

Listening to clients and community first, putting clients at the center of the planning process, and honoring strengths first is building internal motivation and self-efficacy essential for long-term stability. These approaches can also help community motivation to support the work and the solutions, and can reduce the stigma around talking about mental health challenges to build broader community support.

**Our insights for grantmaking:** Interventions that put clients' needs, motivations, and desires first are working well in the initial stages of implementation.

While we may have limited ability to directly fund basic needs, it's important to think through other, indirect ways we can help address these challenges.

## COVID-19

Switching to and establishing new technology and adapting to virtual engagements made it more difficult to build relationships with new clients and partners, and to offer supports in a confidential and trusted way. This was particularly true for clients in crisis or with complex needs, who are more likely to lack access to Wi-Fi or a private space for confidential conversations.

## COVID-19

Virtual opportunities broadened reach and made participation easier for some, particularly clients with some level of stability (e.g., stable housing, Wi-Fi access). The privacy of virtual groups also provided opportunities for people feeling stigmatized or unsure of engaging in support to join anonymously. For almost all grantees, virtual will continue to be part of the approach even when services return to in-person offerings.

**Our insights for grantmaking:** Virtual approaches have shown they can broaden reach and offer support in ways that work better for certain clients and populations.

It's important to fund and promote face-to-face work for building trust and increasing engagement, particularly for those with higher levels of need.

# GRANTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

Finally, grantees shared their suggestions for continued success supports in the alternatives to jail field.



> "There are a lot of smaller organizations in the community that really need Caring for Denver, not just for funding but for increasing their ability to work within the larger justice system."
>
> — Grantee

## FUNDING NEEDS TO BE OPEN TO INNOVATION AND EXPERIMENTATION

Funders need to be more open to and participate in the innovation, experimentation, learning and even "failure" required to transform issues as complex as mental health and substance misuse. This includes a shift from funding that prioritizes "best practices driven by research" towards openness to models tested and proven by community.

## THERE IS NOT CURRENTLY A FUNCTIONING "NETWORK" FOR THIS WORK

While some grantees have established relationships through their work, many don't know each other well — particularly smaller, community-based organizations that want to strengthen ties for expanding referrals, learning from others, and establishing connections in the criminal justice infrastructure.

Resources are needed to promote consistency across the system, break down "awareness silos" and define the

network of programs, institutions, and funders that can work together towards common goals in this space. This includes promoting how City and County of Denver agencies and community nonprofits can work together in more complementary ways.

There is also interest around understanding Caring for Denver as a new funding source in the field and how it can best align with other established funding supports.

## SUPPORTIVE EVALUATION & REPORTING PROCESSES HELP

Reporting processes can take a lot of time and often fail to capture the true value of the work by requiring foundation-driven reporting and metrics.

Grantees feel the Caring for Denver reporting process is collaborative, gives program staff the opportunity to identify and report on what they find valuable, and the questions help staff reflect on progress in ways they don't typically have time to do. Caring For Denver's approach shows Caring For Denver is a supportive partner in this work.

## Our Key Takeaways

**1** Best practices from community experiences should be given equitable prioritization.

**2** Building stronger relationships in the field, including between City justice system institutions and community organizations, is a primary need in the alternatives to jail space.

**3** Working together to help define project logic, strategy, and measures of progress helps grantees lead and drive their own work in ways they appreciate and value.

As a foundation, we'll be using these grantee insights and more detailed grantee data internally to update our next Alternatives to Jail call for proposals, assess how we are showing up in the justice field, and define how we can do better.

Grantees expressed a desire to connect with others who are working on addressing the same areas. This matrix is one way we hope to support this desire. Grantee names are listed at right, linked to organizational websites. We've used x's and shading below to show each organization's grant priorities. Please reach out to us if you would like help making a connection.

| Priority | 5280 High School | Brain Injury Association of Colorado | The Center for Trauma and Resilience | Denver County Court | Denver Fire Department | Denver Police Department - STAR | Denver Police Department - Co-responders | Denver Sheriff | Denver Department of Public Safety (ROCK) | Denver District Attorney's Office | Colorado Coalition for the Homeless | Colorado Circles of Change | DASHR – Denver Alliance for Street Health Response | The Empowerment Program | Harm Reduction Action Center | Life-line Colorado | Make A Chess Move | Mile High Behavioral Health | Second Chance Center | Servicios de la Raza | Sobriety House | The Delores Project | Tribe Recovery Homes |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Provide case management or transition planning** for clients in jail/prison, sober living facilities, or transitioning in facilities, or in community | x | x | x | | | x | x | | x | | x | | | x | | x | | | x | | x | | |
| **Providing peer supports with lived experience** to clients in sober living programs, mental health groups, criminal justice system, schools | | | | x | | | | | | | | | | | | x | x | x | x | x | x | | x |
| **Provide mental health care** to clients in support programs, and criminal justice system support | | x | x | | x | x | | x | | | x | | | | | | | | x | | x | | x |
| **Coordinate linkages & referrals to community support programs** for people transitioning out of criminal justice system/on probation/at risk | x | x | x | x | | x | x | x | x | x | | | | x | x | x | x | x | x | | | x | |
| **Promote self-empowerment** of clients in programs through strengths-based approaches | | x | | | | | | | | x | | | | | | x | | | x | | | x | x |
| **Provide support to meet basic needs**, especially around the social determinants of health (housing/shelter, food, clothing, employment) | | | x | | | x | | | | | x | | | | x | | | | x | x | | x | x |
| **Manage residential / housing programs** for folks working through sobriety, mental health challenges or transitioning out of the criminal justice system | | | x | | | | | | | | x | | | | | | | | | | x | | x |
| **Provide training and education** to providers in various programs around trauma-informed practices, mental health crisis support, and other topics | | x | | x | x | | | | | | | | | x | x | x | | | | | | | |
| **Provide culturally responsive services** based in community that honor and value identity and the use of culturally based non-medical intervention practices to promote mental health | | | x | | | | | | | | x | | | | | | | | | x | | | |
| **Coordinate alternative responses to 911 calls** that dispatch mental health crisis and social support services | | | | | | x | x | | | | x | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| **Promote alternative forms of justice** like restorative justice and retribution payments for individuals involved in non-violent crimes | | | | | | | | | | x | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

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