

Governor Jared Polis
Colorado State Capitol
200 E. Colfax Ave.
Room 136
Denver, CO 80203

December 14, 2020

Dear Governor Polis,

The Denver Homeless Leadership Council (HLC) urges you to prioritize homeless services providers, including overnight emergency shelter staff, day shelter staff, meal service providers in Phase 1 and people experiencing homelessness (PEH) in Phase 2 for COVID-19 vaccine distribution. The recently released vaccine distribution plan currently doesn't specify where these critical staff and community members would be prioritized. Despite prior versions of the vaccine plan that did prioritize shelter staff and PEH, the current plan appears to designate homeless services providers and people experiencing homelessness and utilizing shelters as eligible for the vaccine in Phase 3 along with the general public. This is extremely disappointing and concerning.

Continuing and expanding homeless services during the COVID-19 pandemic has been vital to protecting the health, lives, and safety of our unhoused community members. Staff in homeless shelters are on the front-line of the COVID-19 emergency response delivering essential services, providing shelter, security, resources, and respite for people experiencing homelessness. Our providers have been essential in helping to contain the virus and prevent further strain on our state's public health system. Much like healthcare workers, *as defined by Colorado's Department of Public Health and Environment, our staff and PEH put themselves at risk through daily direct, sustained, and close contact with thousands of guests and residents who may be contagious.* Homeless Service Providers can only continue to provide these essential emergency response services if their staff are able to remain in their roles safe from COVID-19.

Outbreaks in our facilities, among our staff and our PEH continue to take a significant toll. While we have managed to the best of our ability to date, outbreaks at shelters across the state and particularly in Denver, Fort Collins and Colorado Springs have been devastating. For example:

- Since March 15th **859** PEH have tested positive in the metro area.
- Out of 54 staff and guests recently tested at Denver Rescue Mission's Harvest Farm in Fort Collins, an astonishing 46 individuals (85%) were positive for COVID-19.
- Urban Peak's Shelter in Denver had to close to new youth for a full 14 days because 36% of youth tested positive in just one week.
- PEH who contract COVID-19 are at increased risk for severe illness. As of December 7, 29% of PEH who have contracted COVID-19 in Denver have required hospitalization, compared to a 10% hospitalization rates in the general population.

Because we are on the frontline of the COVID-19 response, the HLC strongly recommends that staff of homeless service providers throughout Colorado be classified as Healthcare workers and

included in Phase 1 of the vaccine distribution. We *must* protect these essential workers so we can continue to meet the needs of our most vulnerable neighbors.

Similarly, PEH who are utilizing shelter are at higher risk of contracting COVID-19 because they are often forced to sleep in large congregate settings. A recent study suggests:

- PEH who are COVID positive are twice as likely to be hospitalized,
- two to four times as likely to require intensive care,
- two to three times as likely to die than the general population,
- are more likely to require hospital care.

All of these factors are putting additional strain on our state's hospital system and in turn our entire community.

Additionally, because of systemic racism in housing, healthcare, and other systems, Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) are more likely to experience homelessness and experience severe illness from the virus. The experience of homeless itself also worsens health conditions. For these reasons, the HLC requests that PEH be included in Phase 2 along with other high-risk individuals.

It is critical that Colorado protect homeless service providers and PEH by making the COVID-19 vaccine available to these populations as soon as possible. The relative success of our response thus far has been due to preventative measures that have prioritized PEH. Failure to deliver that same prioritization within vaccination phasing is likely to result in significant hospitalization and death for our most vulnerable community members. Vaccinations priority will support some of the state's most vulnerable residents and critical response personnel, reduce pressure on our public health system, and advance the aim of racial equity. Providing vaccinations in the near term will mean we are purposely protecting our staff and PEH. **We urge you to include homeless service providers in Phase 1 and PEH in Phase 2 of vaccine distribution.**

Respectfully,

The Denver Homeless Leadership Council

Catholic Charities of Denver
Colorado Coalition of the Homeless
Colorado Village Collaborative
The Delores Project
Denver Rescue Mission
The Gathering Place
St. Francis Center
The Salvation Army
Urban Peak
Volunteers of America of Colorado