

Racial equity is a vital component of an effective homeless crisis response system. Amid this global crisis of addressing COVID-19, our community members experiencing homelessness are exceedingly vulnerable as they are unable to shelter in place. While our entire community is facing this crisis together, Metro Denver Homeless Initiative (MDHI) wants to remind local governments, public housing authorities and housing and homeless service provider organizations throughout the region to consider racial equity as a dimension of response efforts.

Racism is woven into the fabric of every system in America, but it is arguably most prevalent in our criminal justice, healthcare and housing systems. During the COVID-19 crisis it is imperative that we prioritize the needs of community members that have been historically victimized by these systems and/or have had exceedingly limited access to the benefits of these systems. There are several pathways by which communities of color may be particularly disadvantaged by a homeless crisis resolution system that is not explicitly focused on equity, and the same is true of any other COVID-19 response efforts.

At Metro Denver Homeless Initiative, we believe that there are several critical steps the community can take now, without impacting expediency, that can improve outreach efforts and ensure community members of color are not left out of existing efforts to keep community members safe, healthy and housed.

1. REGIONAL TASKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Our primary ask is that the region come together to develop a taskforce made up of experts across various areas including but not limited to:

- Racial Equity
- Healthcare
- Data Analytics/Evaluation-GIS
- Housing and Homeless Services
- Lived Expertise in Homelessness/Housing Insecurity

This regional task force would be responsible for augmenting the ideas listed below. These ideas are rooted in racially equitable system design and intended to prohibit racially inequitable healthcare and housing outcomes during the COVID-19 response. Identifying key community leaders in the areas identified can help to ensure this global pandemic does not disproportionately impact communities of color.

A. INCLUDING VOICES OF LIVED EXPERIENCE

Community members of color and people with lived experience of homelessness or housing instability need to be included while planning and guiding efforts in response to COVID-19. Having these voices represented in decision making efforts is an easy way to ensure that in our expediency, we do not neglect to address the needs or barriers unique to marginalized populations.

One of the ways to ensure we continue to value voices of people with lived expertise is through the utilization of virtual listening sessions. These virtual sessions would take place with people experiencing homelessness and/or formerly homeless persons at existing supportive housing locations, transitional housing programs or shelter programs throughout the region. We would also like to see those persons experiencing homelessness who are unable or unwilling to utilize shelter be prioritized in sharing their experience during this time. Separate outreach attempts

should be made to persons experiencing street homelessness and residing in outdoor encampments.

B. RACIAL REPRESENTATION WITHIN EMERGENCY RESPONSE TEAMS

The primary decision makers during the COVID-19 response are located at Emergency Operations Centers of local and state government entities. Part of racial equity and social justice is not only including but also valuing the experiences and voices of community members of color. At this time, while outreach efforts and strategic initiatives are being developed, we want to remind our local and state government representatives of the importance of having representation from community members of color as well as other persons with intersectional or marginalized identities in these efforts. Representation from varying community members can help to ensure no communities' needs are neglected or undervalued during this time of urgency and expediency.

C. HOUSING ELIGIBILITY RECONSIDERATION

Restricting persons with non-violent criminal or eviction history disproportionately excludes community members of color and limits where they can live. Additionally, their access to transportation and employment is also limited. We ask that our partner agencies and public housing authorities thoughtfully reconsider housing eligibility and preferences at this time to ensure all community members experiencing homelessness are not further victimized by racist-infused decision-making.

D. RENT SUSPENSION PROGRAMS

Eviction is one of several pathways to experiencing homelessness. Local data tells us that community members, primarily Black and Latinx households are more likely to experience evictions than their White counterparts. This trend is mirrored in several municipalities throughout the CoC. While some government entities have already suspended evictions during this crisis, we would ask that our housing and homeless service providers, along with local landlords and public housing authorities take this commitment a step further and suspend collection of rent for all person's impacted by a sudden loss of employment or other cost burden. Rather than postponing an eviction that may likely send a household through the homeless crisis response system, addressing the crisis further upstream with rent suspensions may mitigate the barrier of finding housing with an eviction blemish on record. We propose that every municipality with an eviction rate exceeding 2% consider implementing a rent suspension program for the duration of the shelter in place mandate.

E. DEVELOPMENT OF VIRTUAL HOUSING NAVIGATION SITES

Some significant challenges our communities are facing during this time of crisis are closures and direct service limitations of many public facilities, programs, and other service organizations that our participants rely on. This poses a significant challenge in filling vacancies and getting people experiencing homelessness access to the housing they need to successfully practice social distancing and remain healthy. The development of virtual housing navigation sites would allow case managers to continue meeting with clients and to resume activities to further the process of

getting households ready to move into housing (i.e. filling out applications, reviewing program eligibility, verifications, deposit assistance. etc.)

There are also challenges with collecting vital documentation required for housing (Social security cards, birth certificates, government issued IDs). We request that these requirements be temporarily lifted so as not to impede the ability to get people into housing during this difficult time.

We would like to see community partners and municipalities come together to discuss possible utilization of buildings not in use due to COVID-19 (service provider-owned or city-owned properties), to provide a centralized and accessible location for participants to access internet and a virtual housing navigation service.

These centralized locations would need to have:

- Internet access
- Printers
- Scanners
- Computers
- Extra outlets for charging phones

F. ACCESSIBLE TESTING SITES AND PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT

Historically marginalized communities face elevated risks of exposure to COVID-19 for many reasons that can be addressed by having more accessible and strategically located testing sites.

All municipalities within the Denver Metro CoC must evaluate existing data to ensure that testing sites are strategically placed within a 5-mile radius of indigent communities or neighborhoods/zip codes where the population of people of color exceeds their representation in the overall population. These sites must also have well stocked PPE resources. The recommendation to self-isolate makes assumptions about a person's ability to maintain distance from others that may impact families who are doubled-up or large families in small apartments. If possible, we'd like to see testing sites or transportation to testing sites made available in neighborhoods where families are known to reside in motel rooms, like East Colfax, for example. PPE should also be made available on all public transit if it is not already.

G. REEVALUATION OF PRIORITIZATION OF HEALTHCARE TREATMENT OPTIONS

Colorado State Officials have implemented a prioritization of healthcare treatment options in the event of a COVID-19 surge in hospitals. While MDHI's expertise is in serving community members experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity, we would like to take this opportunity to remind the healthcare and housing sectors of the many ways in which institutional and structural racism compound to adversely impact community members of color, especially the ones precariously housed or unhoused. We would like to stress the importance of having representation from community members of color on the healthcare triage teams where decisions regarding someone's access to life saving healthcare resources are being determined.

Community members of color are more likely to have a pre-existing health condition and are also more likely to be employed in a job that cannot be done from home (bus drivers, grocery store clerks, shelter staff), making them susceptible to contracting COVID-19. We would ask the healthcare industry to be mindful and thoughtful about

their prioritization practices to ensure their policies are not exacerbating racially inequitable healthcare outcomes as they have in the past.

2. PUBLIC STATEMENTS FROM CITY COUNCILS

Our secondary ask is that all regional municipalities make a public statement on ensuring equitable treatment and access to resources during the COVID-19 crisis. Public statements from all county city councils, mayors and other influential government leaders will help instill confidence in the community that the government places value and invests resources to ensure racially equitable healthcare and housing outcomes even and especially during a global pandemic. In addition to producing public statements, we would also request that all data shared on those contracting and/or losing their battle with COVID-19 be shared, by race. Disaggregating all available data, by race, will allow the taskforce the ability to monitor progress and develop more aggressive interventions if the solutions outlined above prove ineffective.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Developing this task force and issuing these public statements across the region, are vital components to ensuring racial equity remains at the forefront of our community's COVID-19 response. In addition to having a task force implement these ideas mentioned in this statement, we would also like to share additional resources exploring the unique challenges of addressing COVID-19 response with a racial equity lens in the links below, to encourage our partners to come up with other innovations to serve the community. These links were all used to help inform the ideas described above. We at MDHI are prepared to convene and support the ideas outlined above to help ensure all persons experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity are part of strategic conversations and solution-focused sessions. As a result of COVID-19 our country has shifted and will likely never be the same. There are parts of that shift, including but not limited to the barriers of racial inequity; that we will gladly leave in the past. We move forward striving to build new systems that account for systemic, institutional, and interpersonal barriers like racial inequities to avoid past mistakes and patterns. This will build a community that is stronger and more equitable than we ever dreamed possible.

1. <https://www.nis.us/blog>
2. <https://consumerhealthfdn.org/covid-19-will-not-affect-everyone-the-same/>
3. <https://www.colorlines.com/articles/ring-alarm-covid-19-presents-grave-danger-communities-color>
4. <https://www.csh.org/2020/03/centering-equity-in-times-of-crisis-uncertainty/>
5. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/01/opinion/coronavirus-black-people.html>
6. <https://news.wttw.com/2020/04/06/lightfoot-activates-rapid-response-team-stem-unacceptable-racial-disparity-covid-19>
7. <https://www.propublica.org/article/early-data-shows-african-americans-have-contracted-and-died-of-coronavirus-at-an-alarming-rate>
8. <https://www.cbsnews.com/video/coronavirus-pandemic-takes-heavy-toll-on-minority-communities-in-the-us/>
9. <https://www.thedenverchannel.com/news/coronavirus/coronavirus-in-colorado-latest-covid-19-updates-from-april-6-2020>
10. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/07/us/face-masks-ethnicity-coronavirus-cdc-trnd/index.html>

11. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/world/europe/coronavirus-doctors-immigrants.html?searchResultPosition=10>