Dear Reader,

Released in 2019, The Road to Wellness: A Strategic Framework to Improve Behavioral Health in Denver set forward steps to continue advancing outcomes for Denver residents who suffer from behavioral health disorders. This framework served as the foundation of a broad strategic plan for behavioral health in Denver known as Empower Denver.

Mental health is fundamental to personal well-being and family and interpersonal relationships, and is integral to our ability to contribute to community and society. We must ensure that everyone in Denver who needs mental health support has true access to it. While the actions outlined in Empower Denver are clear and simple, their impact will work to transform the way we address and think about behavioral health in Denver.

Empower Denver identifies three main categories of action for the city: Resources must be more easily accessible to our communities; information and awareness related to and supporting behavioral health and stigma reduction are readily available to the public; and we must collect, share, and use behavioral health data in a consistent and equitable manner.

These categories were identified through a strategic planning process, which involved a great deal of community engagement and stakeholder input. We identified community priorities and heard from behavioral health providers their promise of collaboration and partnership. This synergy is critical, because the city cannot address our residents’ behavioral health needs alone; input, expertise and assistance from our partners in the behavioral health space are essential to the success of Empower Denver.

We look forward to building new relationships with the behavioral health community and to strengthening existing relationships to change the way Denver addresses behavioral health needs together as a team. We also look forward to changing the way our city and our residents think about behavioral health. Social stigma and discrimination can make mental health problems worse and stop a person from getting the help they need.

The work has already begun. The engagement in behavioral health will grow, and the stigma will end. This is how — together — we can empower Denver.

MICHAEL B. HANCOCK
Mayor

ROBERT M. MCDONALD
Executive Director and Public Health Administrator
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Overview: Empowering Denver’s communities to live better, longer

In October 2018, Mayor Michael B. Hancock brought together a diverse group of stakeholders, led by Robert M. McDonald, Executive Director of the Denver Department of Public Health & Environment and Public Health Administrator for the City of Denver, and Robin D. Wittenstein, Chief Executive Officer of Denver Health and Hospital Authority, to form a steering committee charged with developing a strategic framework aimed at improving the behavioral health of all Denver residents.

A month later, Denver voters overwhelming passed the Caring for Denver sales tax ballot measure, setting aside 25 cents on every $100 purchase made in Denver for addressing the mental health and substance misuse needs in our city. Shortly thereafter, the Caring for Denver Foundation was established and charged with the responsibility to disseminate these funds. Combined, these two initiatives engaged nearly 1,700 Denver residents and 112 organizations over the course of 126 community meetings to determine the current state of behavioral health in Denver; identify gaps; examine best practices; and provide recommendations to the Denver Department of Public Health & Environment.

**THIS EFFORT RESULTED IN THE IDENTIFICATION OF FIVE INTERCONNECTED AND OVERLAPPING GOALS**

1. **Our communities promote well-being**
2. **When we seek care, we get the care we need**
3. **We have access to compassionate, integrated, coordinated care**
4. **We act early and manage crises in the appropriate setting**
5. **We have the data to understand and improve behavioral health**

**AND OUR FOUR FUNDING PRIORITIES**

1 → **Youth**
2 → **Community-centered Solutions**
3 → **Care Provision**
4 → **Alternatives to Jail**

True to its charge, the Denver Department of Public Health & Environment has synthesized these efforts into a behavioral health strategic plan, *Empower Denver*, to improve upon the health and well-being of Denver residents. As Denver’s nationally accredited public health agency, with a core mission of empowering Denver’s communities to live better, longer, the Department of Public Health & Environment is uniquely positioned to lead Denver’s effort to improve behavioral health care. Importantly, the Department of Public Health & Environment is strategically positioned to work collaboratively with city, state, and community engagement efforts, as well as enforcement, to ensure healthy people, healthy pets, and a sustainable environment.
Denver already has a large community dedicated to supporting the wellbeing of residents and addressing behavioral health crises when they arise.

Services to treat substance misuse are more common now than in the past. Schools have expanded their substance misuse treatment services and provide suicide-prevention resources. There is more access to medication-assisted treatment, and naloxone - used to treat opioid overdose - is more available than ever before.

However, our services, systems, responses, and relationships too often don’t combine to provide comprehensive care for our residents. Uncoordinated systems and a lack of shared data make it challenging for people to get the care they need or for information to be communicated among all of the people who take care of a person.

The result is that too many residents go without needed supports or care to address their mental health or substance misuse conditions.

Leveraging the work of four separate working groups focusing on behavioral health literacy and community involvement, promoting positive mental health, substance misuse, and behavioral health crisis response, we distilled the five interconnected and overlapping goals identified in the Road to Wellness Framework into three focus areas and goals:

**Goal 1:**
City resources related to and supporting behavioral health are easily accessible to the public

**Goal 2:**
Information and awareness related to and supporting behavioral health and stigma reduction are readily available to the public

**Goal 3:**
Promote consistency in how we collect, share, and use data related to behavioral health
Goal 1 → City resources related to and supporting behavioral health are easily accessible to the public

Why it matters
In 2019, nearly one in six Denver residents (16%) reported needing mental health care but not getting it. And more than 11,000 residents (2%) reported not receiving the help they needed for substance misuse.

Mapping Denver’s Next Steps

**Deploy a Mobile Behavioral Health Unit, A.K.A., “Wellness Winnie”**

- Provide mobile behavioral health and support services to at least 250 housed and unhoused residents in 2020 and increasing by 3% annually through 2023.
- Engage at least 20% of residents served by Wellness Winnie in peer support and navigation services annually through 2023.
- Maintain a 30% retention rate for residents accessing behavioral health and support services annually through 2023.

**Create a Network of Peer Volunteers to Provide Overdose Prevention, Education, and Naloxone Distribution**

- Expand the existing volunteer network of peer volunteers by providing overdose prevention education to at least 15 new peer volunteers by the end of 2021.
- Increase volunteer network thereafter by at least 6% annually through 2023.
- Distribute at least 500 naloxone kits annually via established networks through 2023.
- Conduct 10 community education events annually beginning in 2021, with at least 10 attendees through 2023 (totaling 300 participants), to increase knowledge of local substance misuse issues and increase overdose prevention strategies.

**Conduct a Feasibility Assessment for a 24/7 Care Coordination Center for People Living with Behavioral Health Conditions**

- Secure funding for feasibility assessment by end of 2021.
- Develop a work plan, timeline, and budget for a 24/7 care coordination center by fourth quarter 2022.
- Provide a final report of findings and recommendations to the Denver Department of Public Health & Environment and appropriate stakeholders by first quarter 2023.

**Implement a 24/7 Crisis Stabilization and Transitional Housing Program for People Experiencing a Behavioral Health Crisis, A.K.A., “Behavioral Health Solutions Center”**

- Provide up to 16 beds in the short-term crisis stabilization clinic by first quarter 2021.
- Provide 30-day transitional housing for up to 30 people by first quarter 2021.
- Provide care coordination and transition to services located in the community for up to 46 people by first quarter 2021.

**Divert People Who Are Experiencing a Behavioral Health Crisis from Jail by Providing Easy Access to Appropriate Behavioral Health and Substance Misuse Services**

- Ensure specialty courts combine for an average of 70 jail beds averted daily.
- Specialty courts combine to maintain, at a minimum, cost neutrality.
- Specialty courts combined serve at least 400 people annually.
- Refer at least 30% of contacts in the co-responder program for follow-up care annually.
- Expand co-responder program to include a mental health professional supporting the Denver County Jail and Denver Fire Department by first quarter 2021.

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Goal 2 → Information and awareness related to and supporting behavioral health are easily accessible to the public

WHY IT MATTERS
For many Denver residents experiencing a behavioral health crisis, law enforcement has become the de facto response mechanism. At any given time, approximately 50% of people in custody in the Van Cise-Simonet Detention Center and Denver County Jail have a flagged mental health consideration and experience a length of stay that is 22 days longer than average.

Mapping Denver’s Next Steps

**TRAIN COMMUNITIES TO RECOGNIZE THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS, ESTABLISH LINKAGES WITH SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITY-BASED MENTAL HEALTH AGENCIES, AND EDUCATE INDIVIDUALS ABOUT AVAILABLE RESOURCES**

- Train at least 700 community members annually through 2021 in at least one DenverStrong training focusing on behavioral health care, including suicide prevention, assessment and referral.
- Train at least 300 mental health professionals annually through 2021 in at least one DenverStrong training.
- Refer at least 30% of program participants to behavioral health services annually by way of referral from DenverStrong facilitators.
- Conduct a Youth Mental Health Summit by August 2022 focusing on suicide awareness and prevention.
- Implement a multi-year integrated behavioral health pilot in up to six Denver Public Schools in 2022, focusing on curriculum development, suicide assessment treatment referral, and staff training.

**IMPLEMENT A BEHAVIORAL HEALTH STIGMA-REDUCTION CAMPAIGN, FOCUSING ON SUBSTANCE MISUSE, SUICIDE PREVENTION, AND ACCESS TO COMMUNITY-BASED BEHAVIORAL HEALTH RESOURCES**

- Issue an RFP for an anti-stigma campaign with vendor selection by first quarter 2021.
- Complete formative research by third quarter 2021.
- Launch anti-stigma campaign by first quarter 2022.

Provide at least 50% of qualified youth diversion as an alternative to sentencing for marijuana offenses annually through 2023.
Goal 3 → Promote consistency in how we collect, share and use data related to behavioral health

**WHY IT MATTERS**
Currently, providers and first responders who interact with residents experiencing behavioral health challenges often do not have access to information that would help inform their treatment.

**Mapping Denver’s Next Steps**

**CREATE A COORDINATED ALERT SYSTEM FOR BEHAVIORAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE MISUSE TRENDS**

- Finalize a multi-agency alert system decision tree by first quarter 2021.
- Initiate quarterly stakeholder meetings to assess data, review the evaluation plan, and determine the appropriate course of action by first quarter 2021.
- Conduct an initial rapid assessment and response exercise with key stakeholders for fentanyl overdose fatalities by fourth quarter 2020 and run annual exercises thereafter to assess warning system functionality.