

2023 Denver Municipal Candidate Questionnaire on Public Safety & Policing



CHRISTIAN STEWARD

The candidate's responses to each question are in italics and are written word for word. No edits were made to spelling or sentence structure per 501(c)3 guidelines.

The seat you are running for: *Denver City Council District 8*

Public Safety:



Denver Taskforce for Reimagining Police and Public Safety's Definition of Public Safety: Public safety ensures that all community members decide how to organize a social environment that provides the freedom to live and thrive with the protection and support of social, physical, mental, and economic well-being. Safety is not a function of armed paramilitary forces with a proven track record of racism and violence. Public safety prevents, reduces, and heals harm.

1) Do you agree with the above definition of public safety? If not, how would you define public safety?

Yes

COVID-19 highlighted the need for investments in the system of safety and health. People in Colorado prisons were seven times more likely to contract COVID-19. Black people in Denver are more likely to be incarcerated than white people in Denver. Black people across Colorado represented a disparate amount of COVID-19 deaths.

2) What is your vision for public health and safety in Denver? What, in your opinion, are the factors that are preventing Denver from achieving your vision of public safety?

My vision for public health includes creating a department of neighborhood safety. This will include inter-departmental training for civilians/volunteers to organize and operate citizen patrol groups. This may be a long term goal so I think I would start with a pilot program by continuing walking groups and continuing to invite city officials and existing citizen patrol groups to unite the neighborhoods and residents in my area. The more connected people are inside of their neighborhoods, the less likely they are to experience safety challenges.

3) In your words, what is the connection between public health initiatives and public safety initiatives?

I believe they have parallel impacts on one another. Public health, which includes mental health, impacts individual safety and public safety.

4) Are you familiar with the Denver Reimagining Police and Public Safety Taskforce's work over the last two years and the resulting 112 recommendations?

Yes

5) What behaviors or activities are currently criminalized in Denver that you view as outdated and harmful?

Minor drug charges, bench warrants for traffic violations, prostitution, minor parole or probation violations.

Police Accountability and Reform

Lawsuits regarding Denver Police officers' behavior have cost the City and County of Denver almost \$17 million in 2022 – a significant rise in the last five years and the third-highest figure since 2010. Denver taxpayers are currently responsible for settlements when a law enforcement officer's behavior is deemed inappropriate.

6) Would you support the City in moving away from being self-insured to possibly pooling insurance with other municipalities, thereby decreasing the taxpayer's burden to pay for the settlements? Why or why not?

Decreasing taxpayer's burdens are essential but I do not know enough about self-insured or pooling insurance to comment meaningfully.

7) What role should body cams play in prosecution, absolution, and accountability in officer-involved shootings?

Body cams should be used as evidence in investigations and officers fees should be charged if they do not use or purposefully turn off body cameras.

Housing/ Homelessness

Covid-19 has disrupted Denverites' access to basic needs, including employment, housing, and access to substance use and mental health treatment. Throughout the pandemic, shelter use in Denver has increased by 54%, while unemployment rates rose from 2.8% to 7.1%. During the pandemic, sweeps of homeless encampments reached an all-time high.

According to reporting by the Denver Post, hundreds of thousands of tax dollars were spent in 2020 on these repetitive, unhoused sweeps. Additionally, people experiencing unsheltered homelessness are 10% times more likely to have contact with police than people living in shelters. A recent Urban Institute analysis of Denver Police Department data found that arrests were disproportionately for offenses associated with unsheltered homelessness among this SIB target population of 2,181 in 2018.

8) How do you plan to address displacement and gentrification while balancing Denver’s need for growth and more affordable housing?

Workforce development is a huge factor in dealing with displacement. Gainful employment limits the vulnerability of displacement. Affordable housing should be considered in the spectrum of housing. We must address all housing costs in order to stabilize the concept of affordable housing. I would like to create policies that create opportunity zones for our most vulnerable and divested neighborhoods. These policies would incentivize developers to develop in those areas.

9) What is City Council’s role in addressing homelessness? What tools do you believe will be effective in addressing homelessness in Denver?

I believe City Council's role should first be to humanize people who are suffering from homelessness, this can be done by storytelling by the office of Storytelling. These values should be reflected in policies that create pipelines that address physical and mental health. Strengthening programs like the Star Program, creating showering facilities, and partnerships with hotels to provide emergency housing in the event of cold weather are some of the more simpler tools I could enact. I think it will be imperative to implement vocational and apprenticeship programs for youth, veterans, people with addictions, and those with mental health challenges. These are the people who seem to be the most vulnerable to homelessness.

10) Many of the Taskforce Recommendations are aimed at stopping the criminalization of homelessness and poverty(i.e., addressing “crimes of existence”) and reducing contact between the community and armed law enforcement officers. If elected/reelected, will you support and work to implement these recommendations? Why or why not?

Yes. We should not demonize or criminalize poverty. We must address it from a systemic lens and not just continue to penalize individuals in these circumstances.

Behavioral Health and Substance Use

Colorado is 47th in the nation for access to mental health services. One out of every three men and four out of every five women imprisoned in Colorado have moderate to critical mental health needs. As of March 2022, 12.7% of Coloradans who died in police encounters this year suffered from mental illness. Denver drug overdose deaths surged for the second straight year. Deaths related to opioids surged by 308% between 2019 and 2021, according to city data. Recent evidence from cohort and modeling studies suggests that Safe-Use-Sites are associated with lower overdose mortality (88 fewer overdose deaths per 100 000 person-years [PYs]), 67% fewer ambulance calls for treating overdoses, and a decrease in HIV infections.

With a 12-1 vote, the council approved a framework for creating a government-sanctioned supervised drug use site in the city. The only condition was that the state legislature had to pass a law clearing the way for a supervised-use facility. Nearly four years later, the Colorado General Assembly has not cleared that path.

11) If elected or reelected to the City Council, will you support policies that increase access to long-term treatment, limit drug arrests, and implement evidence-based harm reduction services, such as safe consumption spaces? What methods would you employ?

Yes I would support but I think we should be thoughtful in our approach. For instance, in safe consumption spaces, we must be aware that this will not become grounds to encourage the sales and large distribution of harmful drugs. Limiting drug arrest for small possessions of drugs should be eliminated. I would encourage DPS to implement mental health curriculum and long term treatment plans for families experiencing these public health challenges.

A study conducted in 2020 on the STAR pilot 911 response program in Denver found that mental health specialists responded to calls involving trespassing and other nonviolent events and found a 34% drop in reported crimes during the six-month trial. The study by Stanford scholars also showed that the direct costs of the alternative 911 approach were four times lower than police-only responses.

12) What do you think is the role of STAR and other community-based programs, including LEAD (Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion) programs? How do you envision funding them?

I love and support this program. I have worked with them very closely on our East Colfax neighborhood walks. I am a Community Connector for the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure. I worked with the STAR program when the program expanded. I introduced the program to leaders and residents in East Colfax.

My aim is to highlight other means of addressing the challenges of neighborhoods like mine and educating the population about programs like STAR. When I was the President of East Colfax Neighborhood Association, I invited them to our RNO meeting to speak about the inception of the program and the expansion and what role they play community health and safety.

Community Oversight

Since the release of the Task Force Recommendations, The Citizen Oversight Board (COB) was granted the ability to appoint, by and with the consent of the City Council, the Independent Monitor, who serves at the pleasure of the Board. The Independent Monitor was a position that the Denver Mayor previously appointed. The COB was additionally granted regular access to public safety department leaders and confidential records. Although this change is a big step forward, there is still a call for increased citizen oversight over Denver Police and ensuring that DPD operates with accountability and transparency. The COB oversees the independent monitor who receives and processes complaints about DPD, the Denver Sheriffs Department (DSD), and sworn personnel. The COB also monitors investigations into officer-involved shootings and in-custody deaths and publicly reports on findings.

13) Will you support giving the COB and the Office of the Independent Monitor subpoena power to pursue these investigations? Why or why not?

Yes, but I think it is important that education and training be associated to any independent monitor. They should have a clear understanding of subpoena power and how the city and departments of the city operate. I think the COB and OIM should also have relevant representation of BIPOC. This will be imperative in order to operate from a place of fairness and equity.

14) In your view, what is the role of citizen oversight of DPD and DSD? How will you improve this process or be vocal and supportive regarding improvements that could and need to be made to our accountability structures?

I think we need to modernize our city's systems and processes. We also should evaluate the processes as they exist from an equity lens.

Gender-Based Violence

Denver has experienced an increase in the reporting of sex crimes over the last three years. The prosecution rate for these cases in DA McCann's office is roughly 44%, meaning the DA chooses to prosecute 44% of sex crimes cases referred to her by the DPD. The other 56% are not prosecuted for various reasons, such as the victim's wishes, a perceived lack of evidence, and a belief that a jury will not convict. The following policy questions are related to sexual and domestic violence. At least one of your answers should include a specific policy change or initiative that would specifically reduce violence-related trauma experienced in the LGBTQ, disabled, and Black and Brown communities. In Colorado, "restorative justice" is only offered for victims of sexual violence when the perpetrator has already been incarcerated.

15) Would you support a statewide policy or local pilot that created an optional restorative justice model for victims of sexual assault or domestic violence through diversion (i.e., without using incarceration)? Please explain why or why not.

Yes I would. Anytime we can create diversion programs to address violence is a win for the city and for the departments who manage the safety of our citizens

16) Generally speaking, do you believe DPD has sufficient enforcement resources to reduce sexual and domestic violence in our communities? Briefly explain why or why not and what type of funding changes you would propose if any.

No. But it is not solely their role. We must empower individuals and community organization to address sexual and domestic violence in our communities.

17) Please briefly outline any initiatives, if any, you believe the city should take to reduce sexual violence and domestic assault without the use of incarceration.

We should implement diversion programs in jails and prison to decrease recidivism and limit further harm after initial arrest. We should include clauses in marriage licenses that indicate penalty or enrollment in mental health treatments if ever domestic or sexual violence happens.