

2023 Denver Municipal Candidate Questionnaire on Public Safety & Policing



JAMES WALSH

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 Mayor



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 all public health and safety policy involves building new systems that are rooted in the practices and philosophies of harm reduction and restorative justice, inviting voices from communities that have been historically targeted by law enforcement to play a lead role in constructing policies and procedures that reduce harm. The factors that have prevented Denver from achieving this are the lingering remnants of a decades old culture of white supremacy and dominance-mentality that has relied on the use of force to resolve any social conflict. This history goes back to the rule of the KKK during the 1920s and a long historical lack of cultural competence.

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

Public health initiatives that do not address racial and class disparities are then public safety issues, as they reinforce the same social structures. Healthy communities mean less of a need for law enforcement.

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?

Urban Camping, substance use, sex work, cash bail system, jaywalking, Vagrancy,

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?

I would support this, in the sense that it might relieve taxpayers from shouldering the responsibility.

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

Body cam footage should always be used and, when appropriate, made public so that evidence in any case is open and transparent

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?

I will address these issues by directly addressing the larger issue: an immense disparity of wealth in our city and our nation. Addressing this disparity can solve many of the related social issues. This means a minimum wage that is a living wage, expanded city support for both immigrant worker centers and worker-owned cooperatives, a massive increase in Universal Basic Income, and support from the Mayor's office to public workers who wish to unionize. Beyond this, channeling all resources--federal, state, and local--to ensure that every unhoused individual has decent, dignified housing. The city owns many parcels of land which can be used for this and also in purchasing aging hotels.

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

City Council's role is to ensure that the unhoused are treated with dignity and that humanity always leads when shaping policy. City Council also has a responsibility to include voices of those who are or have been unhoused in shaping new policies. This is the simple tool of inclusivity. Other tools include decriminalizing the unhoused, destigmatizing their existence.

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, absolutely, because they are rooted in the practice of Harm Reduction

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, all of the above. In particular, more than one safe use space is needed in Denver to insure that all who use substances can do so in a safe, comfortable environment supervised by medical personnel.

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?

STAR, LEAD, street medic programs, and other related alternatives to police-only responses are vital and need to be expanded to reduce violent encounters with police. They save the city money, so these expanded programs pay for themselves.

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, absolutely, as this is the only real way to ensure that the office can fully investigate incidents.

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?

Citizen oversight for both DPD and DSD is vital to maintaining trust with the wider community. I would strengthen not only citizen oversight for the police but also citizen accountability for the DA's office, which investigates allegations of misconduct. I would support any community oversight that will lead to a reduction in mass incarceration and police violence.

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 make this an option that victims can choose from. I am a strong advocate of RJ and would like to see its use expanded in a variety of ways.

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.

I believe that DPD might have sufficient resources, but non-police response strategies are greatly needed, offering support and mental health services.

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.

A massive expansion to Universal Basic Income. The data from the trials that have been tried is convincing. Giving those at the bottom of the economic ladders access to increased resources is a good idea that will save the city millions due to saved costs from other areas of public health and safety. this would be my number one priority.

Mayoral Specific Questions:

A. What are your priorities for the qualifications of the next Police Chief?

Community relations, knowledge of harm reduction and restorative practices, an eagerness to learn and to interact with communities.

B. What is your view or understanding of the relationship between the city council and the mayor? Do you want to make any changes to this current relationship?

As things are currently, the Mayor has more power. I would move to rebalance this relationship so that the Mayor does not hold so much power, but has more checks and balances surrounding them.

C. Do you currently have a working relationship with the Denver City Council?

I know several members

D. If you were elected as Denver's next mayor, what would accountability for bad behavior in DPD look like? Who should decide officer discipline? If status quo, give examples of situations where justice was achieved.

Accountability looks like an Indep. Monitor with expanded powers and the ability to subpoena. It looks like accountability for the DA, so that discretion about what cases to pursue and what not to pursue is not rooted in bias. Accountability looks like added technology beyond just body cams.

E. Who/what process should determine the size of the Department of Public Safety's annual budget?

The Citizens Oversight Board should have a role to play in this, along with the direct input of citizens groups involved with police reform.

F. What is your history of working on justice transformation or public health and safety initiatives?

I founded the Romero Theater Troupe 18 years ago, with the mission of using the stage as a tool for highlighting stories of injustice and social activism. For all of these 18 years, we have done so, using stories to engage working class audiences in larger social issues. The arts creates important dialogue and inspires many toward activism. In our 18 years of existence, over 600 people have come through the troupe.

G. What are your plans regarding the Department of Public Safety's current leadership if you are elected as Denver's next mayor?

I do not yet have specific plans beyond thoroughly reviewing the job that current leadership has done.

H. If elected as Denver's next mayor, what would be your top 5 public health and safety priorities to accomplish in your first 100 days?

Expansion of STAR program, implementing a Harm Reduction model throughout public health policy, expanding Universal Basic Income program, eliminating inequities and disparities in regard to mass incarceration, and ending sweeps and criminalization of homelessness.

The Task Force has prioritized establishing The Office of Neighborhood Safety (ONS) to implement many of our recommendations. Several cities across the nation have created similar offices. The ONS would exist outside of the Department of Safety but embed community-based safety solutions into the fabric of the city's government. It would also create a hub and infrastructure for nonpunitive and preventative approaches to public safety.

I. If you are elected as Denver's next mayor, would you work with the Denver Reimagining Policing and Public Safety Taskforce to create a successful and responsive ONS?

Yes

J. How would you ensure accountability for oversight of undercover programs involving confidential informants that involve children's, drugs, or anti-gang programs?

I would ensure accountability through eliminating these programs as they exist, rebuilding them under new codes of conduct and responsibilities.