

2023 Denver Municipal Candidate Questionnaire on Public Safety & Policing



SHANNON HOFFMAN

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 10*



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 community and I dream of a Denver where everyone can thrive on their own terms. We envision a fully operational social housing model where the city is building and buying buildings so that everyone has a home. We envision a rapid transit bus on Colfax and more City funding for accessible, sustainable transit so that everyone can get around more easily.

We envision accessible mental health services and substance use treatment, including safe injection sites with wrap-around services in City-owned buildings. When addressing public health and social crises, my most essential concern is that we are not wasting public dollars on criminalizing and further traumatizing people who are made poor by systems of oppression. Instead, we should leverage those dollars for the programs and resources that do support community members to thrive.

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

The root issues of crime and public safety issues are a disinvestment in public health supports that actually prevent crime and public safety problems. Denver is using public safety dollars and employees to address crises that should be managed and addressed by public health dollars and professionals who know how to implement and manage data-driven solutions that we know have worked in other cities.

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?

Denver is continuing to criminalize poverty when we address these issues in the following ways:

-Addressing homelessness through sweeps, or traumatic displacements, of people instead of a permanent, supportive, housing-first approach

-Addressing drug use through arrests for possessing drug paraphernalia instead of addressing drug use from a harm reduction standpoint

-Ticketing people for using the bathroom outside when we do not provide adequate public restrooms

-Punishing people who have no space to deposit their trash

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 do not think taxpayers should be held accountable for police misconduct and harm, so I am a proponent of removing police payouts from taxpayers' responsibility. If achieving this means pooling insurance with other municipalities, I would support that. I also support the other two Taskforce recommendations on this matter to require that police and Sheriff departments pay for abuse and misconduct claims or settlements beyond the statewide cap of \$25,000 with personal insurance, rather than from the City general fund, as well as to require all law enforcement officers to carry personal liability insurance as a condition of employment.

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

We are learning that there is a limited role body cams can play in prosecution, absolvment, and accountability in officer-involved shootings due to the footage reinforcing officers' perspectives. While camera footage can make it seem like there is an objective witness, officers are increasingly remembering that they are being filmed, and they know how to establish a narrative on film that justifies their actions. Given these limitations, I am still a proponent of the Task Force's recommendations around body cams, which include requiring body cameras to activate automatically at a time that captures law enforcement interactions in their entirety, not just when an officer removes their gun. Additionally, I support increasing the Office of the Independent Monitor's access to body camera footage that is unedited, as well as an annual audit and report of all body camera inventory.

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?

In order to expand the availability of housing, we need to promote every housing type in every neighborhood. First, we cannot rely on the market alone to provide the housing that we need, nor the housing we need at particular price points. A social housing model is one of our most ambitious plans to resolve our housing crisis. With the City as a social housing developer, instead of a private company, any "profit" turned can go back into funding more building for new housing.

Rent tiered by income means that higher-income people who pay more offset lower rent for lower-income tenants. We often hear that Denver lacks 50,000 units, but this refers to homes for folks making under \$50,000 a year. More housing for them should be prioritized. Toronto and Helsinki have successfully implemented social housing, and I look forward to making it a reality in Denver.

In addition to social housing, we must make crucial amendments to the Expanding Housing Affordability policy passed by Council last year to require developers to build more deeply affordable units in any new developments, especially for people making \$20,000 to \$50,000 per year. We also need to push for the statewide rent stabilization ban to be repealed at the state level so that municipalities like Denver can set caps on the amount rent is increased year over year related to our city's market realities.

Land use reform is another important piece of achieving housing equity. Here, Denver City Council has significant influence. Ideas in this realm include converting vacant City-owned land, buildings, and parking lots into affordable housing. We can also implement deed restrictions on publicly owned land that will be developed by private companies. I also believe in paying reparations to Indigenous folks in the form of returning stolen land to its original stewards and ancestors.

I will continue to advocate for tenants' rights, including a stronger rental registry, a tenants' bill of rights, and especially apartment acquisition funds to give tenants' unions and local nonprofits the opportunity to purchase buildings and stabilize rent. Finally, we must shift funding toward housing and social services and away from police's traumatic displacement, or "sweeps," of unhoused neighbors.

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

We need to intervene in the predatory private market to regulate what is built and for . Right now while we build permanent housing for everyone, transitory solutions like tiny homes, SOS, safe parking, safe injection sites, public restrooms, free access to rec center showers, public handwashing, laundry trucks, etc are all critical tools.

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?

Reducing unnecessary contacts between law enforcement and civilians is a proven strategy for preventing tragic outcomes that are all too prevalent in our policing culture. Taskforce recommendations on decriminalization/deprioritization of nuisance-level and petty offenses are well-placed and I would support legislative action to implement them. Some offenses would likely draw differing opinions from members of the public as to whether they are, at least in some cases, more than a needless law enforcement priority -- public intoxication, for instance, can pose dangers both to the intoxicated party and to others nearby. But a careful, open review and debate of which offenses are primarily charged only in a discriminatory or harassing manner would be a welcome public process worthy of the Council's time and attention.

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?

Broader access to mental health and substance treatment programs will be essential to improving public safety, combating homelessness, and refocusing police attention away from petty misdemeanors and on to violent crimes.

I am wary of safe consumption spaces, which are not currently allowed under Colorado statutes. Barring any legislative action, our effort would be better placed on gaining voluntary participation in treatment. This can be accomplished by investing more funds in dignified housing solutions that require participation in personal betterment --- this be a low bar, as simple as requiring residents to help stock a food pantry. Once they are a part of the system, and gain trust in that system, they will be far more likely to take up and succeed at recovery. This is a proven model that is already used by organizations here in Denver.

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 believe civilian public safety personnel have a key role in Denver. The STAR teams have more than proved their worth, and we should plan to double the number of teams on the streets for each of the next three years. Likewise, programs like LEAD and the Civilian Crash Investigation Teams further reduce needless police interaction with the residents of Denver. Funding for these programs can and should come primarily from the City's general budget, but can also be found in federal and state level grants. But if in the end still more funding is requiring, I suggest that we come to the people of Denver with a comprehensive, long term plan that lays out what additional funding would be needed, including a tax, if that is necessary.

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?

A short and sweet answer: Yes.

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?

Civilian oversight of DPD and DSD is essential. First, the OID and COB should be empowered to investigate police activity and widely publicize their findings to the public. Additionally, more people should be encouraged to use their mediation services when they feel they are the victim of overzealous policing. Next, the mayor's HRCP commissions should be granted a formal role in reviewing conditions at the county jail, improving existing policies, and suggesting new ways in which our sheriffs and police officers interact with the public.

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.

I can only support restorative justice in the case of non-violent crimes. An "optional" restorative justice model assumes equal footing between the perpetrator and the victim. This cannot exist in a sexual or domestic assault situation.

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 do not believe that DPD has sufficient enforcement resources to reduce sexual and domestic violence because enforcement is a tool ill-suited to prevention. Prevention is best delivered through social and behavioral channels that are not within the core competencies of police agencies, broadly speaking. Instead, we should focus prevention efforts in mental health treatment, and early education including teaching tolerance and acceptance in our schools for sexual and gender minorities. Finally, DPD has demonstrated recent progress in raising the profile of bias-motivated crimes in a manner that may not yet be achieving prevention but has shown promise in increasing police cultural competency with victim communities and encouraging victims to come forward.

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.

Programs that reduce financial strain on families, provide adequate shelter, nutrition and health care for the needy, and improve cultural competency amongst providers are all proven methods to abate sexual and family violence. Raising the standard of living for our residents is by far our best hope to improve the safety of all our residents.