

Responding to Criminal Justice High System Utilization in Boulder

A collaborative response involving All Roads, American Medical Response of Colorado, Boulder Community Health, Boulder County, City of Boulder, Clinica Family Health, Colorado Community Health Alliance, Focus Reentry, Mental Health Partners, and the 20th Judicial District.

Overview

Approximately 30% of Boulder’s unhoused and unsheltered population is responsible for a high number of interactions with the criminal justice system, with each person accounting for up to \$67,000 in annual costs to our police, prosecutors, courts and jails. When combined with the expenses of healthcare services such as emergency room visits and hospital stays, direct expenses can easily exceed \$84,000/person/year.

These “high utilizers” have significant mental and behavioral health challenges which tend to make them resistant to engagement with traditional services and sheltering. Additionally, their criminal histories often make them unable to lease units, even with traditional vouchers and support. High utilizers are often chronic, low-level offenders whose crimes are not serious enough to warrant a prolonged sentence in either jail or prison. As a result, high utilizers often enter a tragic spiral that exposes them to personal harm while also threatening community safety and public spaces.



Response

A dedicated response from all levels of government collaborating with both non-profit and private sector organizations is required to finance and employ creative and coordinated solutions to the challenges presented by high utilizers. Toward that end, an interagency task force, composed of various agencies who regularly interact with these individuals, began to take action toward this issue in 2022. The task force has developed coordinated strategies for providing care to high utilizers when and where they are ready to receive it. This approach has provided some initial success measured both in terms of exits from homelessness and transitions of high utilizers to lower utilizers.

The interagency task force is also coordinating policy advocacy efforts aimed at expanding the availability of housing-focused mental health and drug treatment services. These solutions require substantial financial support from both the state and federal government and are thus long-term goals and not under the immediate control of the Boulder community.

Contact Carl Castillo at castilloc@bouldercolorado.gov or 303-441-3009 to learn more.

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Proposed Pilot Program

In addition to its ongoing work, the task force is proposing a pilot program that combines providing the housing stability that high utilizers need with intensely coordinated and individualized wrap-around services. The proposed pilot program aims to meet high utilizers where they are and break them out of their cycle of recidivism.



The proposed pilot program incorporates:

- Mental and physical health care;
- Behavioral health care;
- Peer support by individuals with lived experience;
- Case management services;
- Housing retention support;

Start-up costs for the proposed pilot program are estimated to total approximately \$5 million for year-one, \$2,000,500 for year-two, and \$1,925,500 for every year thereafter to support a minimum of forty-five high utilizers. This total includes operational staffing, one-time housing acquisition, housing vouchers, bridge housing, program staffing centered on behavioral and mental health, one-time robust program evaluation, and the creation of a landlord insurance fund.

Ensuring Success

National evaluations of similar supportive housing programs show that housing individuals results in decreased criminal justice interactions. For example, 86% of participants in a [New York Frequent Users Service Enhancement \(FUSE\) program](#) remained housed after two years and they spent 40% less time in jail than a comparison group.

The proposed pilot program follows best practices in equitable, inclusive, and trauma-informed housing with wrap around services to set high utilizers up for success and support landlords who want to help.

The task force has a dedicated data and analytics team that will help monitor utilization of individuals engaging in the program. Metrics of success may include decreases in criminal justice interactions, reductions in unnecessary utilization of emergency healthcare services, increases in engagement levels, and improvements in the length of time an individual remains housed.

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