




## Denver announces a housing and homelessness department — kind of

No details yet, but the Hancock administration says a “proposed new department will galvanize and enhance city resources.”




Britta Fisher, chief housing officer at Denver's Office of Economic Development, speaks at a groundbreaking for Tammen Hall on the campus of Saint Joseph Hospital, June 26, 2018. (Kevin J. Beaty/Denverite)

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Denver is getting a new department of housing and homelessness.

The not-particularly-unexpected news came in a statement Thursday from Denver Health and Human Services in response to the release of a city audit of the Hancock administration’s efforts to address homelessness.

In [his report](#), City Auditor Timothy O’Brien noted “uncertainty over who is ultimately responsible for leading strategic planning and policy within the city on homelessness.”

Mayor Michael Hancock said in the Health and Human Services statement that his administration appreciated “the auditor’s common-sense recommendations, which are in line with our plan to focus our collective efforts through the creation of a new department of housing and homelessness.

“We are strengthening and aligning our resources to empower more people to move from the streets to permanent housing, supports, and work with dignity and compassion,” Hancock said.

The Health and Human Services statement said that “with the formation of a new department of housing and homelessness, and as recommended by the auditor’s review, the city will undertake development of a new comprehensive strategic plan to address homelessness, which will explore new innovations and build on Denver’s current and past successes. The plan will implement measurements to track the city’s forward progress and show the human impacts of Denver’s strategy and investments into the prevention of and solutions to homelessness.”

Cathy Alderman, vice president of communications and public policy for the [Colorado Coalition for the Homeless](#), said what she has heard about a new department “could be an absolute step in the right direction, getting our resources in line ... and getting folks in place who can charge down a path to a goal.”

“We really want to see the city commit to a strategy with set goals,” she said. She said resources would also have to be committed, which might involve asking voters to increase funding.

Alderman said that to those in her organization and others that provide housing and other services to people in homelessness, little would be new in the auditor’s observations of “fragmented” collaboration with nonprofits and other partners; lack of strategic planning; unclear authority; and staff shortages — including the absence of a dedicated data analyst with the time and expertise to help Denver’s Road Home fulfill its responsibilities. Denver’s Road Home is the city agency charged with coordinating services for the homeless.

Alderman said she hoped the audit would push the city to take a more thoughtful approach. But elements of the city’s response gave her pause.

In its statement responding to the audit, Health and Human Services pointed to progress. It said, for example, that the annual Point in Time survey of people experiencing homelessness shows a decline. But Alderman said the decline has been relatively small and that she was concerned by increases within the overall numbers of people who were newly or chronically homeless.

The [Metro Denver Homeless Initiative](#), the nonprofit that leads the Point in Time count across the region, recently revamped its data collection systems.

Without good data, “you’re responding to things that are anecdotal,” said Matt Meyer, who recently took over as MDHI’s executive director. He said MDHI was already working with Denver’s Road Home and government and nonprofit agencies across the region to improve information gathering.

“What the auditor has brought up are valid concerns, but I think that they’re ones we’re all working on,” Meyer said.

Alderman, of the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless, also saw reason for hope, including increased attention to the issue of homelessness in Denver in general.

“We are having better conversations about homelessness than we’ve had in the past,” she said.

The Health and Human Services release did not elaborate on what the proposed new housing and homelessness department might look like.

Derek Woodbury, communications director for Denver Economic Development & Opportunity, followed up with a brief statement, saying, “We anticipate making a broader announcement on improved leveraging and alignment of resources at the Denver Housing Forum” on Friday.

Earlier this week, the city’s top housing official, who now works for Denver Economic Development & Opportunity — formerly the Office of Economic Development — was asked along with three politicians who want to succeed Mayor Michael Hancock whether they would support a separate housing department for Denver.

“We have actually been working on this for some time,” Chief Housing Officer Britta Fisher said, indicating an announcement would come, as Woodbury said Thursday, during the city’s annual forum on affordable housing on Friday.

Fisher’s comment drew a derisive reaction from Hancock’s challengers. Hancock was not among the panelists.

“What a surprise. New initiatives during an election year,” Lisa Calderón said.