

# Pipe Dreams and Picket Fences:

Direction from Denver's Houseless People on Housing Needs and Priorities in the Context of  
Today's Public Housing  
By Housekeys Action Network Denver



## Executive Summary

### 2022 Housing Survey

*What kind of housing must we fight for that will lead to enduring change?* The 2022 Housing Survey, conducted by Housekeys Action Network Denver (HAND) in Denver, Colorado, documents nearly 1,000 houseless people's input around the housing needed today. This report shares the results of surveys, interviews, forums, and community meetings. If we are working to "end homelessness," as is so often stated, this work must be directed by houseless people themselves. Lived experience offers an intimate understanding and ability to identify current and foreseeable obstacles that perpetuate this ever-pressing issue. This report provides direction, for and by houseless people, around the kind of housing sought – the priorities, desires, barriers, pathways to accessing, and support needed for housing.

#### Key Findings

- **Between 93% and 99% of houseless people want some form of housing.**
- **Personal qualities** are top motivators for wanting or preferring housing - the top qualities are **safety, autonomy or freedom, and community.**
- The most important housing amenities are **climate control** (being able to warm or cool a space), **bathrooms** with shower access, and viable housing **locations.**
- **Affordable housing (or lack thereof)** is the **number one barrier** to accessing housing and **most needed support:**
  - **81-88%** of respondents need housing **under \$1,000 per month**
  - **60-69%** of respondents need housing **under \$600**
  - **17-29%** of these respondents needed housing to be **free.**
  - The top 2 barriers to housing are **not having money** (53%) and having a **low credit score** (38%).
    - Beyond financial barriers - the next top **housing barriers** are **not having a phone** (35%), **not having official documents** (32.8%), and having a **felony charge** on one's criminal record (31.8%).
  - The top support needed to stay in housing is **financial support** (63%).
    - **43%** of respondents need **financial support alone** to maintain housing.
    - Beyond financial support - the next top supports needed were **allowing guests/visitors** (36%), navigating **paperwork/bureaucracy** (25%) and **legal support** (24%) followed closely by **mental health support** (24%).
- The top housing program rules viewed as "**deal-breakers**" for living there are **curfew** (49%), **not being allowed, or limits on, guests** (44%), and **staff room checks** (40%) followed closely by **religious requirements** (39%) and **not being allowed roommates or partners** (39%).
- Houseless people rightfully **lack faith in the housing system.** Their doubt is backed by **years-long waitlists, abysmal housing lottery odds,** and a dependency on **service providers and case managers as gatekeepers.**
  - Respondents report waiting on housing waitlists for an **average of 2.4 years,** and **almost 4 years** for housing.
  - Houseless people recognize that a critical part of the process, and one that proves a major barrier, is **qualifying for housing,** namely by belonging to a **demographic group,** having **good credit,** a spotless **criminal record,** and various **official documents and paperwork** at the ready.
- Denver's houseless repeatedly highlight the prominence of significant **shelter issues.**
  - Over 36% of respondents are currently living in shelters, while 27% answered "shelter" as the second most common type of supportive housing program having lived in.
  - Over 56% reflect negatively on supportive housing programs, including shelters.
    - Top three reasons for negative experiences: **stealing, violence,** and **doesn't help with housing.**

- Despite housing vouchers being regarded as the most current “pathway to housing”, **over 50% of respondents don’t know what a housing voucher is, how it works, nor know anyone who has ever had one.**
  - **Less than 44%** of survey respondents have ever personally, or know anyone personally, who has **found housing with a voucher.**
  - **Only 28%** of respondents preferred housing vouchers to affordable housing units
    - Top factors involved in preference one way or another were the existent **housing barriers** (the top being **landlord discrimination**), the need for **support or services**, (namely **housing navigation**), and having the choice to choose the type of housing.

## Public Housing Research

**What happened to public housing in the last 10 years?** In addition to 2022 Housing Survey results, this report also includes new research on public housing, both nationally and in Denver, over the past 10 years: fiscal trends, units lost, and voucher use. We reveal a continued loss of public housing and a turn to private-public partnerships where the market controls housing and its cost.

### Key Findings

**The national and local government trends have turned to the private market as the main source of low-income housing using subsidies or tax breaks. This does not create the housing people need.**

- HUD funding for construction-focused programs – building affordable housing or projects – has generally decreased or remained stagnant while funding for assistance-based programs or neighborhood/community development or revitalization have remained or increased.
- Over the last 10 years:
  - There was an **18% reduction in funding for the public housing capital fund**. This reduction is “matched” by a **13% increase in funding for tenant-based vouchers.**
    - There has been a **national loss of 228,289 low-income public housing units.**
      - In **Denver**, we have **lost 731 public housing units.**
    - **The rate of success for finding housing using a voucher has been unacceptably low.**
      - In **Denver**, there was an **increase of 1,429 housing vouchers issued.**
      - In 2021, five months after receiving vouchers through the Denver Housing Authority (over one month beyond the current 120-day expiration), only 77 of 1,000 people with vouchers got housing. This is an **8% chance of finding housing using a voucher.**
  - Low Income Housing Tax Credits (LIHTC) allocations in Colorado increased, with federal credits increasing **181% from 2012 to 2021.**
    - This did not match an equally high increase of actual units. The increase in unit numbers was the **highest in 2015 at 2,794 units** and has not returned to that level since.
    - Most LIHTC housing is at 60% American Median Income (AMI).
      - **In all of Colorado, over the last 10 years, only 3,029 housing units have been built with LIHTC funding for people under 30% AMI compared to 12,588 for 40-70% AMI.**

**There is greater interest in putting money into private developers’/ landlords’ pockets than affordable housing.**

- As the federal government turns to the private market for low-income housing, housing is subsidized for wealthy homeowners (most over 100% AMI) through Tax Increment Financing. **The total in tax deductions awarded nationwide was just under \$200 billion in 2019, while the entire budget for the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) was \$53 billion.**

**Our nation’s funding priorities are skewed towards the wealthy and war.**

- While **HUD’s budget has remained fairly stagnant, the Department of Defense’s budget has greatly increased.**