

Colorado Justice Report

Founded in 1999, CCJRC is a network of organizations, faith communities, and individuals working to eliminate the overuse of the criminal justice system and advance community health and safety in Colorado.

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It's Time to Modernize Denver's Syringe Service Policies

Arcane rules the City of Denver put in place back in 1997 are threatening the ability of Denver's Syringe Service Providers like the Harm Reduction Action Center to operate effectively to protect public health and confront the overdose crisis.

By Jason Vitello, Equity and Community Development Manager

Syringe Service Providers (SSPs) are community-based programs that provide people who use drugs with sterile syringes and essential services like naloxone distribution, health testing, wound care, and connections to treatment for infectious diseases and substance use. Born out of the AIDS epidemic in the late 80s and early 90s, SSPs have a long history of saving lives and protecting public health. SSPs prevent overdoses, reduce disease transmission (HIV and Hepatitis C), and safely dispose of syringes—all while delivering life-saving connection and care for people who use drugs.

The Facts Are Clear

For over 30 years, research has proven SSPs to be safe, effective, and cost-saving. They don't increase drug use, crime, or syringe litter but do connect people who use drugs to treatment and recovery services at much higher rates.

Outdated Rules Are Hindering Progress

Denver's SSP policies haven't kept up with the city's growth or the overdose crisis. A 1997 ordinance capped the city's SSPs at just three and imposed a 1,000-foot buffer from schools and daycare centers. These rules are outdated and harmful:

- The cap is insufficient: Denver now has over 700,000 residents, yet only three SSPs serve this growing population. These programs are stretched to the breaking point.
- The buffer rule is unnecessary: All current SSPs operate near schools or daycares under waivers, without any documented harm. The restriction is both impractical and counterproductive in a city where real estate and zoning are already challenging.

The Solution Is Here

A new ordinance, championed by At-Large Councilmembers Serena Gonzales-Gutierrez and Sarah Parady, alongside District 11 Councilmember Stacie Gilmore, seeks to lift these outdated restrictions. This measure will allow more SSPs to open and expand access to life-saving services at a time when Denver faces an unprecedented overdose crisis and rising HIV rates.

Why This Matters

- SSPs reduce disease transmission, prevent fatal overdoses, and save taxpayer dollars.
- Evidence shows SSPs enhance public safety without increasing drug use or crime.
- Cities like Washington, D.C., and Pittsburgh have repealed similar restrictions with overwhelmingly positive results.
- Denver's own Department of Public Health and Environment backs this change. Its 2023 Syringe Access Program Needs Assessment highlights how current rules create barriers and increase preventable harm.

CCJRC is proud to work alongside harm reductionists and public health experts to help pass this ordinance. It's long past time for Denver to align its policies with evidence-based practices, save lives, and invest in the health and safety of our community.



Spotlight on the DOC Budget: What You Need to Know

By Christie Donner

Last month, Governor Polis unveiled his budget strategy for the 2025-2026 fiscal year. With a projected \$680 million tax revenue shortfall, legislators face having to make strategic cuts to balance the state budget. Yet, despite these constraints, the governor is requesting an additional \$39.9 million for the Department of Corrections (DOC) to operate Colorado's prisons next year, based on a projected 3% increase in the prison population.

Breakdown of the Governor's \$39.9 million additional request:

- **\$8.2 million** and 13.5 additional staff to account for 427 more male beds, based on a projected 3% increase in the inmate population from the Division of Criminal Justice (DCJ). This includes 200 beds at Buena Vista and 227 private prison beds, maxing out all available private prison capacity in the state.
- **\$8.1 million** to cover rising medical costs for private medical contractors and pharmaceuticals, driven by the same 3% inmate projected population increase and an increase in the "per offender per month" (POPM) rates set by third-party administrators.
- **\$26.3 million** for staff compensation increases.

Technical Parole Violations Are Driving the Increase

One of the major drivers of the projected prison population increase is the sharp rise in people returned to prison for non-criminal "technical" parole violations. In FY23-24, these violations rose 19%, and we have already seen a 21% increase in the current fiscal year. The trend is especially concerning for women—technical parole violations for women increased 30% in FY23-24 and another 30% so far in FY24-25.

The Journey of "The Long Bill"

The powerful Joint Budget Committee (JBC), comprised of three House Representatives and three Senators, has already begun hearings to craft the "Long Bill," Colorado's annual budget legislation. This critical bill moves quickly: introduced in the Senate on March 24 and in the House on March 31, it must reach the Governor's desk by April 4.

The Long Bill is the most impactful legislation of the year—reflecting the state's values and priorities—but it follows one of the least transparent processes in the legislature. Public testimony is not allowed during department briefings, caucus debates, or floor debates. There are few opportunities even for organizations like CCJRC to weigh in effectively. This lack of transparency poses a significant barrier to accountability, especially for decisions like DOC funding.

Concerns with the DOC Budget

Our initial review of the DOC budget raises serious concerns, starting with this question: why are we increasing the billion-dollar DOC budget during a severe state budget crisis? Every state department, including the DOC, should be putting forward thoughtful, creative solutions to reduce the prison population and cut costs—not be allowed to simply plug their projected numbers into the same old algorithm and leave it at that.

And the bigger issue remains: why are we expanding prison capacity when the DOC is still facing a severe ongoing staffing crisis? Chronic understaffing directly impacts inmate safety, health, and access to quality programs. This isn't just a DOC problem—it's a public safety issue.

A Grim Look Ahead

Another looming concern: DOC is running out of capacity. If the projections hold, all private prison beds will be exhausted, and medium-security beds—the security level with the greatest demand—will run out entirely. Looking ahead, this likely sets the stage for a request to build a new prison or reopen a shuttered private prison in next year's budget—despite DOC's ongoing inability to safely staff its existing facilities.

Our Stance

CCJRC believes it is irresponsible to expand prison capacity without addressing the root causes of rising incarceration rates. The General Assembly must focus on managing the prison population to align with realistic staffing levels, ensuring safety, operational efficiency, and the well-being of people in the system.

Now is the time for policymakers to take meaningful steps to reduce prison populations and invest in systemic solutions. CCJRC will continue to monitor the process closely and provide updates on how you can take action as the budget hearings proceed.

Important Dates

November 1, 2024 - Governor Polis released his 2025-26 Fiscal Year budget request.

November 12, 2024 - JBC staff presented their analysis of the Governor's budget to the JBC.

December 4, 2024 - [JBC staff briefed the JBC on the DOC budget](#) (includes parole board).

December 13, 2024 - DOC presented at a hearing before the JBC, including [written responses](#) to legislators' questions.

December 13, 2024 - The Parole Board presented at a hearing before the JBC, including [written responses](#) to legislators' questions.

January 2, 2025 - Governor can submit a supplemental budget amendment on this date to include changes resulting from ballot measures voters passed in the November election.

March 24, 2025 - Introduction of the Long Bill in the Senate.

March 31, 2025 - Introduction of the Long Bill in the House.

April 4, 2025 - Deadline for the budget bill to be sent to the Governor for signature.

2024 Voter Turnout: Empowering Voices from Colorado Jails

This year, we witnessed a significant milestone in civic engagement: the transformative impact of Colorado’s SB24-072, which required jails statewide to provide six hours of in-person voting. As a result, eligible voters in 49 county jails participated in democracy during the November election, making their voices heard.

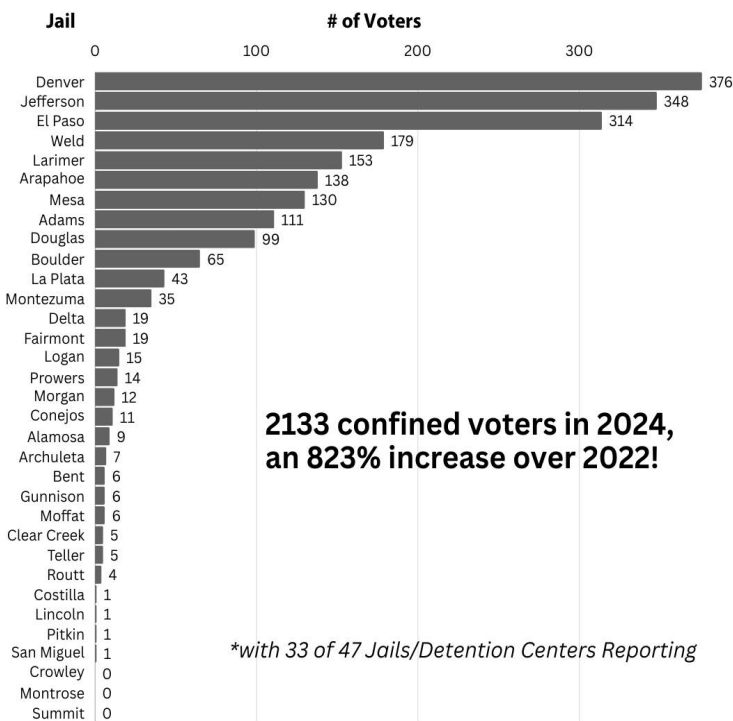
This initiative wasn’t just about casting votes—it was about empowering justice-impacted people, educating them on the importance of informed voting, and amplifying their voices to shape policies affecting their lives. Colorado voters also weighed in on key criminal justice measures, such as Proposition 128 (Parole Eligibility) and Amendment I (Right to Bail in First-Degree Murder Cases). Although the outcomes weren’t what we hoped for, CCJRC remains steadfast in our mission of fighting for a more equitable and just legal system.

On a brighter note, Amendment H (Judicial Discipline Procedures) passed, advancing accountability within the judicial system, while Proposition 131 (Ranked Choice Voting) was rejected, protecting voting accessibility for incarcerated individuals.

In 2022, only 231 eligible voters in jail cast ballots statewide. This year, that number skyrocketed by an astounding 823%, with 2,133 incarcerated voters participating—a direct result of SB24-072. We’re optimistic about building on this progress and achieving even greater turnout in future elections.

Thank you for supporting this critical work. Together, we’re advancing a democracy that represents all Coloradans, and a legal system that prioritizes prevention and rehabilitation, and ensures fair and equal justice for all.

November 2024 Jail-Based Voter Results*



Farewell, and off to new adventures

Dear Community and Members,

As I write this, I am overwhelmed with gratitude for the incredible journey I’ve had as the Civic Engagement Manager at CCJRC. Serving this community over the past seven years has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life.

I’ve learned so much from my amazing colleagues, and together we’ve made meaningful strides in criminal justice reform. I am profoundly grateful to this team for trusting me to advance our civic engagement initiatives and for embracing the ideas I brought to the table. Reflecting on our collective achievements fills me with pride and joy.

Together, we’ve:

Increased Black voter turnout.

Successfully opposed jail expansion in Arapahoe County.

Launched a statewide jail-based voting program.

Partnered with the Secretary of State’s office to ensure voting plans for eligible voters in jail.

Helped pass groundbreaking legislation mandating in-person voting in all Colorado jails—the first initiative of its kind in the nation.

As I prepare to step away and pass the baton, I want to express my heartfelt appreciation for the opportunity to contribute to this mission. While it’s bittersweet to leave, I’m thrilled to share that I’ll be starting my own consulting business, Community of Color Organizing (COCO). Through COCO, I will continue focusing on civic engagement and advocating for criminal justice reform, extending my work to support community organizations locally and nationally. I look forward to this new chapter and to staying connected with all of you.

If you’d like to stay in touch, please feel free to reach out at Jasmine@cococonsulting.org. Wishing you all a joyful and happy holiday season!

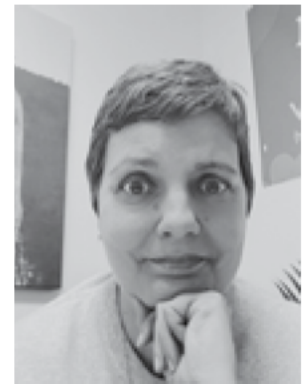
Warm regards,
Jasmine





**Welcome Jennifer!
Meet CCJRC's new
Communications Coordinator!**

We welcome Jennifer Dillon to our team as CCJRC's new Communications Coordinator! Jennifer is a dynamic communications strategist and political organizer who is deeply committed to amplifying community voices. She believes those with lived experience of injustice and oppression should lead the movement for structural change. Her approach blends powerful storytelling with savvy strategy to shift public



perceptions and build momentum for dismantling systemic injustice and creating a world where everyone has what they need to thrive and feel free.

She grew up in Colorado and studied literature and communications at the University of Colorado, Boulder, before spending two decades living and organizing on Maui, Hawai'i. With over ten years of experience helping nonprofits, campaigns, and elected officials achieve their goals, she has built a reputation as a creative and effective leader in strategic communication.

As co-founder of Bring Our Neighbors Home and the Colorado Drug Policy Coalition, Jennifer has led impactful campaigns for anti-carceral drug policy and ending mass incarceration and police violence. An unflinching advocate for CCJRC's mission, Jennifer is committed to raising the organization's profile, communicating its transformative work, and engaging people in a way that inspires bold action. She strives to build narrative power that moves Colorado beyond failed punitive practices and toward a vision of public safety grounded in community health and collective care.

In her spare time, Jennifer enjoys reading, playing the ukulele, practicing mutual aid, and spending as much time as possible with her kid, her nieces, and her dogs.



CCJRC is a proud member of
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YES! Count me in! I want to support CCJRC and help eliminate the overuse of the criminal justice system in Colorado.
Enclosed is my tax-deductible contribution!

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