

Jan 28, 2025

# CCJRC Statement on Denver Mayor Johnston's Veto of the Needle Exchange Ordinance

The Colorado Criminal Justice Reform Coalition is deeply disappointed in Mayor Mike Johnston's veto of Ordinance 24-1791, a critical measure that would have removed unnecessary restrictions on life-saving Syringe Service Providers (SSPs) in Denver. By overriding the City Council's 8-5 vote and disregarding recommendations from public health experts within his own administration, the mayor has failed the residents of Denver—particularly those most at risk of preventable overdoses and infectious diseases.

SSPs are critical tools for preventing overdose and disease transmission. This veto is more than a setback; it is a decision that actively endangers lives. Ordinance 24-1791 was a pragmatic, evidence-based effort to roll back policies put in place in 1997 at the height of the AIDS epidemic, a time when fear and stigma—not science—shaped public health decisions. Denver's restrictions aren't just outdated—they're out of step with the rest of the nation. No other city among the largest 250 in the United States, and no other jurisdiction in Colorado, imposes a distance restriction from schools and daycares or a numerical cap on these critical public health facilities. The White House's model policy explicitly denounces the use of such restrictions as unnecessary barriers to care. Outdated policies like these leave Denver trailing behind as other cities see progress in combating overdose rates. In 2023 alone, Denver's SSPs collected 650,000 used syringes. SSPs protect first responders and the public by providing safe needle disposal and substantially reducing the presence of discarded needles in the community. **Nearly 30 years of research shows that SSPs are safe, effective, and cost-saving, do not increase illegal drug use or crime, and are associated with an estimated 50% reduction in HIV and Hepatitis C incidence. New participants in SSPs are five times more likely to enter drug treatment and three times more likely to stop using drugs than those who don't use the programs.**

*"SSPs save lives, provide hope, and connect people with vital services. Mayor Johnston's veto strikes at the heart of compassionate, evidence-based public health work. He has failed to integrate any modern harm reduction into his Roads to Recovery program, keeping us stuck in jail-centered solutions. As Denver grapples with the most dangerous drug supply in history and infectious diseases are on the rise, the city must invest in harm reduction measures, not obstruct them."*

– **Jason Vitello** | Equity & Community Development Manager, CCJRC



We mourn the lives lost—and the countless more now at risk—because of this failure of leadership. The mayor's decision is a tragic misstep, but the fight is far from over. We will continue advocating for a city that prioritizes public health, data-driven solutions, and human dignity. Denver residents deserve nothing less.