

# 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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## 2024 Here We GO

By: Jasmine Ross, CCJRC Civic Engagement Manager

Hello, community, and members! It's been an exciting start to the year for our civic engagement team. Thanks for all your support.

For several past election cycles, CCJRC has been working with Denver election officials and jail personnel to pilot a very successful jail-based voting project. Most people in jail are eligible to vote but face many barriers due to their confinement. We are proud to partner with Senator Julie Gonzales (D-Denver) and Rep Manny Rutinel (D-Adams) on SB24-072 that would require that all 61 jails in Colorado have a robust voting program, including mandating in-person voting opportunities.

The County Sheriffs of Colorado oppose the bill and several Sheriffs from El Paso, Jefferson, and Pueblo testified that what they had in place was working just fine even though the data from the 2022 General Election tells a different story. El Paso has an 1,800-bed jail and 0 people voted, Jefferson has a 1,600-bed jail and 3 people voted, and Pueblo has a 700-bed jail and 48 people voted. The Colorado Clerks Association is split with some supporting and others opposing.



CCJRC and SB-72 supporters at the Capitol

SB-072 passed its first committee hearing on a vote of 3-2 and will next be voted on in Senate Appropriations Committee. We are overjoyed with our success with this first step and appreciate Sen Gonzales and our partners who testified in support with us including America Votes, Soul2Soul Sisters, Colorado Black Women for Political Action, COLOR Latina, League of Women Voters, Common Cause, CEO, Interfaith Alliance, ACLU-CO, and three elected Clerk & Records Paul Lopez (Denver), Amanda Gonzales (Jeffco), and Josh Zygielbaum (Adams). When this bill passes, Colorado will have the most comprehensive jail-based voting requirements in the country.

We are also excited to share that we launched and are teaching the first civics class inside the Denver County jail. Students will learn the history of voting rights, and many other practical topics to help them be informed and motivated to vote and otherwise be involved in their communities. Once students complete the 4-week course, they will receive a cer-

tificate of completion. We couldn't have done this without the partnership of the Denver Election Division and the Denver Sheriff's Office.

Lastly, we helped the Denver Election Division run a competition in the Denver jails to design the "I voted" sticker for the November election in Denver. The two hand-drawn designs below were selected and both artists got compensated by the Denver Election Division. It was such a fun experience for everyone involved, especially the people incarcerated. We hope it will be an on-going tradition.



As you can see, civic engagement is killing it! With 2024 being such a significant election for so many offices from President to local District Attorneys we are gearing up to ensure that justice involved people know their voting rights, get registered to vote, and VOTE. Please contact [jasmine@ccjrc.org](mailto:jasmine@ccjrc.org) if you'd like to get involved.

## Crisis in Corrections:

By: Jason Vitello, Manager of Equity & Community Development

Last year the General Assembly approved a \$1 billion budget for the Department of Corrections (DOC), including funding for 700 more prison beds, despite the worst staffing crisis in DOC history. We tried to stop this but weren't successful.

Currently, the Department of Corrections staff vacancy rate is at 20% -- more than double what it was before the pandemic. The vacancy rate is much higher for social workers (61%), teachers (51%), and health professionals (50%). These staffing challenges are not unique to Colorado--as numerous reports have uncovered, there is a persistent prison staff crisis in the US.

We knew we needed to do more to let policymakers and the public know about what life was like for people incarcerated. So, last fall we sent out a survey to people in prison across the state and asked them how the current DOC staffing shortage is affecting them. We released our report, [Crisis in Corrections: The DOC Staff Shortage and the Inmate Experience](#), on the first day of the legislative session before a joint session of the House and Senate Judiciary Committees.

The findings are devastating, but not surprising. 92.9% of the over 400 respondents say that their facility is understaffed, and there is a clear consensus that this shortage impacts all aspects of life. There is more

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violence and drug use, and it is harder to get quality medical, dental, and mental health assistance. There have also been major cuts to education, employment, reentry, parenting, and other rehabilitative programming.

Nearly 90% report that DOC case managers and teachers are being made to work security shifts. Also reported is an increase in lockdowns when there aren't enough guards and the inappropriate use of segregation to deal with people having a mental health crisis. The problems go beyond the prison walls. Most inmates report that it is more difficult to communicate or visit with their families and loved ones.

The mission of the CDOC is to create "transformative opportunities" for those under their supervision. Sadly, this data reveals that because of a massive staffing shortage, people in prison in Colorado are not receiving the services necessary to meet their basic health and safety needs, or the programming to help them successfully reenter society.

We would like to express our heartfelt thanks to the over 400 people in prison who shared their stories and experience. Please know that CCJRC is committed to doing all we can to continue to raise awareness about what life is like inside and demand solutions, including reducing the prison population.



### Beacon at Skyline is Saved (at least for now.)

By Pamela Clifton, Manager of Constituent Services

For the first time in our twenty-five-year history CCJRC helped keep a prison open! The DOC was required by the Joint Budget Committee (JBC) at the state Legislature to reduce beds because the prison population isn't growing as fast as had been projected. One of the options DOC put on the table was closing Skyline Correctional Facility because they said it's the "easiest" prison to close. It is relatively small at 126 beds and the staff can easily be relocated to other prisons in Canon City.

But Skyline is the home to Beacon, a remarkable program that is an incentive unit developed by former director of the DOC Dean Williams who wanted to change the culture and experience of being incarcerated. There are a few staff, but Beacon is mostly run by the residents on a peer-to-peer model that focuses on building a cooperative community, fostering family connections, and recovery support. Skyline is a minimum-security prison, so the physical environment is an important component of the program design.

DOC told JBC members that they could move Beacon to Centennial Correctional Facility, a maximum-security prison, without undermining the program's effectiveness. What???? That would destroy the intent and impact of Beacon. The residents at Beacon, their loved ones and other allies like CCJRC started flooding JBC members, including a Change.org petition that had over 1,800 signatures. This mobilization made all the difference! Although the Legislature can tell DOC they need to close beds, they cannot tell them which ones, but they were very clear that their preference was to keep Skyline open with the Beacon program there. DOC agreed and found beds at other facilities to close.

It's a great win for the residents at Beacon and their loved ones, and a nod to Director Williams' legacy. However, we think Skyline/Beacon is still vulnerable down the road if DOC is required to close more beds. It is the easiest prison to close, so supporters need to stay vigilant!

## Legislative Update

Christie Donner, Executive Director

We're more than halfway through the session and themes are starting to flush out. Unlike other states that are seeing significant rollbacks of hard-won reforms, we are not likely to lose as much ground in Colorado, at least not this session. Some progress will be made in the drug policy arena, but any bill related to progressive sentencing reform or decarceration doesn't have much of a chance, especially while this Governor is in office. Here are some highlights of our priority bills or others that we are involved in.

Removing barriers for people with criminal records continues to enjoy strong bi-partisan support and both [HB24-1133](#) Criminal Record Sealing and Expungement Changes and [HB24-1004](#): Ex-Offenders Practice in Regulated Occupations have a clear path to become law. As does our priority bill to ensure eligible voters in jail have an opportunity to vote, including in-person voting from jail ([SB24-072](#)).

Two bills that came out of a legislative interim study group that CCJRC was a part of have already become law. [SB24-029](#): Study Metrics to Measure Criminal Justice System Success, and [SB24-030](#): Recidivism Definition Working Group. Kinda wonky bills around what metrics to use to measure success but they have the potential to have meaningful impact especially for us data nerds.

Health and harm reduction approaches to drug policy are also well supported including bills to advance access to treatment ([HB24-1045](#)), substance use disorder prevention ([SB24-047](#)), harm reduction ([HB24-1037](#)) and recovery-friendly workplaces ([SB24-048](#)). Sadly, one of the most consequential bills that could reduce overdose deaths by allowing local communities to operate an overdose prevention center ([HB24-1028](#)) will likely not pass, just like it didn't pass last year. But efforts to go backward to more "tough on crime" approaches that mandate treatment as a condition of bond ([HB24-1126](#)) and make possession of synthetic opiates a felony ([HB24-1306](#)) have died in committee.

The importance of good defense cannot be understated this session because in addition to killing regressive drug bills, a truth in sentencing for violent offenses bill ([HB24-1127](#)) also failed in its first committee. But this victory is fleeting. Proponents are working on a ballot measure for November election that mimics [HB24-1127](#). There's also more defense still to play out, including efforts to repeal some pretrial and bond reforms ([HB24-1284](#)).

Unfortunately, efforts to advance sentencing reform and decarceration are hitting brick walls. For the first time in our 25 years at the Capitol we had a sponsor, Rep Amabile, who refused to introduce a bill we developed to strengthen the prison population management measures law and reduce the prison population. The DOC and the Gov's office opposed the bill, and she didn't want the fight. Most baffling is that she asked us if she could sponsor the bill last summer, we didn't ask her. Sometimes you just have to shake your head, shake it off, and keep moving forward.

Similarly, a very important bill that would rewrite the indeterminant sentencing laws for sex offenses, [SB24-118](#), is also likely to die despite research and expert testimony about how current law doesn't align with best practice research. Neither does it accommodate for DOC's decades-long inability to provide sex offense treatment to all the people who are required to complete it prior to being eligible for release. We hope that class action litigation is coming soon.

One of our bigger fights will be over the \$1.2B DOC budget and the request to add hundreds more prison beds, despite the severe and persistent staffing crisis. Budgets are moral documents that should reflect our values, not just funding priorities. While the DOC budget continues to grow at an alarming rate, [higher education is grossly underfunded](#) and [K-12 funding is at 1989 levels](#), when adjusted for inflation. We'll have a lot more information on these bills and more in our next newsletter. We also email a detailed weekly legislative update. If you'd like to get on our email list, contact [pam@ccjrc.org](mailto:pam@ccjrc.org).



This year marks CCJRC's twenty-fifth anniversary. We would have never reached this milestone without all the people, across all these years, who have shared their time, talents, and resources to make it so. It has been a journey. Here's a little bit about our story.

In the beginning, there was no CCJRC. In 1999, a handful of community folks came together to support legislation sponsored by Senator Dorothy Rupert (D-Boulder) and Representative Penfield Tate (D-Denver) that called for a three-year moratorium on building prisons in Colorado. The first of its kind in the nation.

This was the era where the motto on the Colorado Department of Corrections' (DOC) website was literally "coping with explosive growth." In 1985 a bill passed that doubled all felony sentences to "get tough" on crime. Between 1985 and 1990, the prison population doubled, and the DOC budget grew from \$56m to \$136m. Between 1990 and 2000, the population doubled again, with a DOC budget of \$429m. People in prison were shipped out-of-state because prisons were full. In 1993, two other dark aspects of corrections took hold: the opening of the first for-profit private prison and the opening of the infamous Colorado State Penitentiary, an administrative segregation prison where people were in solitary confinement 23 hours a day.

Looking back, none of us really understood the beast we were taking on in 1999. We named ourselves the Prison Moratorium Coalition and started meeting in church basements and living rooms to plan and organize. None of us had any legislative experience, didn't even know where the bathrooms were at the Capitol, and had mostly forgotten our 8th grade civics lesson on how a bill becomes law. These were humble beginnings, but we were motivated to learn and work together. Of course, the bill died at its first committee hearing in 1999 and again in 2000 but our response was the same, "What are we going to do next?" A seed had been planted that was starting to develop roots.

We spent our early years educating ourselves, talking with anyone who would listen, and building infrastructure to support collective action. By 2002 we had a new name, the Colorado Criminal Justice Reform Coalition, which included hundreds of people and dozens of organizations and faith communities. In 2003 CCJRC became an official nonprofit after being incubated by the Rocky Mountain Peace & Justice Center and Epimethian Press, a books-to-prisoner project, to whom we are forever grateful.

We were starting to develop some policy chops and our first major legislative victory came in 2002 with asset forfeiture reform, followed next by major parole reform in 2003. But that year also saw the passage of a bill — despite all our effort to oppose it — to build another solitary confinement prison, the Colorado State Penitentiary II.

This began our era of trying to stop prison and jail expansion. In 2003, we sued the state to stop construction of Colorado State Penitentiary II — and lost. From 2004-2005 we organized with the local community and national anti-private prison activists and DEFEATED efforts to build private prisons in both Lamar and Pueblo. But we failed to stop the ballot measure for the new jail in Denver in 2005.

By the mid-2000s, the political temperament was starting to change as Colorado turned "purple" and frustration over out-of-control prison spending created more opportunity for bi-partisan support for legislative reform. In 2007, the Legislature created the Colorado Commission on Criminal & Juvenile Justice to make reform recommendations and CCJRC served on multiple task forces for the next fifteen years. Either through the Commission or on our own initiative, CCJRC played a leading role in the development and passage of more than fifty reform bills. And they mattered.

The prison population peaked in June 2010 and continued to steadily decline. Seven prisons, mostly private, were closed!!!! The pan-

demie resulted in a more substantial but short-lived decline, as the prison population has been increasing over the last few years. We have also gone through our own transformation, including the Board adopting a new mission in 2015: to eliminate the overuse of the criminal legal system and advance community health and safety. This new mission captures our two compass points: what we want to dismantle and what we want to build.

This growth was inspired by lessons learned and a changing landscape. The Affordable Care Act went fully live in 2014 which we knew would be a game changer for justice-involved people. CCJRC launched a new campaign specifically to focus on ensuring that they knew about these new options for accessing health insurance and care. In 2014, we also realized that we HAD to engage in state budget advocacy to shift resources out of the criminal legal system and into community-led safety efforts and services. This started with the passage of our bill that created the WAGEES community reentry grant program.

We call our budget advocacy Community Reinvestment Initiatives and we have passed four bills that created state grant programs to support community nonprofits providing services for reentry, crime prevention, victim services, and harm reduction. To date, over \$120m has been awarded and that's only a drop in the bucket as to what is needed. The powerful implementation of these initiatives by the Latino Coalition for Community Leadership and dozens of community direct services providers, mostly BIPOC led and serving, is the demonstration of what true investment in public safety looks like.

Another way we have helped build community power is by expanding the right to vote to people in jail serving a misdemeanor sentence (bill passed in 2005), and to people on parole (bill passed in 2019). In 2020, we launched our jail-based voting campaign in partnership with election and sheriff's personnel in Denver. In 2024, we are working on a bill that would mandate voting programs in all Colorado jails.

We also want you to know we are who, and who we have always been. We, or people we love, have criminal histories, are crime survivors, are in recovery (or not), or some combination. These lived experiences are the wellspring of our understanding, commitment, compassion, and vision. Even though CCJRC is not a direct service organization, we want to be relevant to people currently impacted by the system, which is why we publish Parenting from Prison and Getting On After Getting Out: A Reentry Guide, now in its 7th edition.

As we celebrate 25 years of advocacy, CCJRC extends its heartfelt gratitude to its Board, staff, volunteers, members, sister advocacy organizations, and funders whose unwavering commitment and authentic collaboration have been the driving force behind our impact.

In the fall of 2023, CCJRC was blessed to be able to buy a building in the historic Five Points neighborhood in Denver. This begins a new chapter as we intend for this physical space to allow us to build even stronger roots and branches for the movement, not just CCJRC, for the decades ahead because there is still much work ahead.

We still have too many people in a cage with a devastating impact on their children. We are still in the grasp of a failed drug war with an unregulated and unpredictable drug supply that has created the worst overdose crisis in his ory. People with serious mental illness are still languishing in jails and prisons across Colorado as a default to a broken behavioral health system. Racism and racial disparity are just as endemic and entrenched today as always. People with criminal records still face many social and economic barriers. Politics is still politics, and the DOC budget is now well over \$1 BILLION.

So, rest up friends. Steel your spine. Get clear and focus on your vision and intention. We have made real progress but still have so much work to do.

The Harm Reduction Action Center (HRAC) is Colorado's largest Public Health Agency that works specifically with people who use drugs. HRAC is one of our closest friends and allies and they are having a fabulous fundraiser coming up in May. CCJRC is a sponsor we would love for you to join us at their annual fundraising event. May 23, 2024 starting at 5:30 pm (MST) we will be at the Space Gallery at 400 Santa Fe Dr. Denver. To learn more about them or to buy tickets please go to [www.harmreductionactioncenter.org](http://www.harmreductionactioncenter.org)







CCJRC 821 22nd St., Denver, CO 80205



Please help us celebrate our  
25th anniversary!  
Join us for our 15th annual  
Voices for Justice  
fundraising event on  
Wednesday  
September 11, 2024  
at the Mile High Station  
Tickets on sale June 1st!  
Scan this code or  
Go to [ccjrc.org](http://ccjrc.org) for  
more info!



### Second Chance Center's 2nd Annual Royale Charity Event



Our dear friends at The Second Chance Center (SCC) have worked for over 12 years to become a leading reentry organization. Join us in supporting them at their awesome fundraiser at the Mile High Station, 2027 W. Colfax Ave. Denver, CO on Friday May 31st from 5:30 - 9:30. For more information and to buy tickets go [www.sccccolorado.org](http://www.sccccolorado.org).



CCJRC is a proud member  
of Community Shares of  
Colorado!

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!

***Your support makes all the difference!***

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|---|---|
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