

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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Ballot Initiatives, Legislation, and DOC, Oh My!

by Kyle Giddings, CCJRC Deputy Director

As 2025 winds down, CCJRC is gearing up for one of the most consequential years in recent memory. The 2026 legislative session and the statewide ballot fight are coming fast. Here's what to expect.

2026 BALLOT FIGHT

On November 20th, Advance Colorado, a dark-money political group pushing regressive criminal justice measures since 2024, submitted the required number of signatures to place Initiative #85 on the 2026 ballot. Initiative #85 would dramatically increase penalties for possession and distribution of drugs that contain fentanyl, including:

- Making simple possession of minor amounts of drugs that contain fentanyl a felony, even if the person didn't know or intend to possess fentanyl and even on a first offense.
- Making selling drugs that contain any amount of fentanyl a Drug Felony 1 with a sentencing range of 8–32 years in prison, (mandatory minimum of 8 years). This is alarming because selling a single pill containing any fentanyl would carry the same sentence as trafficking millions of pills.
- Allowing convictions for the lowest-level drug felonies (Drug Felony 4) could be used as a "strike" to enhance someone's sentence as a habitual offender.

This initiative is out of step with what actually improves public safety. For decades, drug laws have hit low-income and minority communities the hardest, deepening disparities without reducing drug supply. Tough-on-crime policies haven't worked; they've pushed the market toward cheaper, more potent, and more dangerous drugs, leaving people less safe.

Legislative Council estimates that within three years, Initiative #85 would send up to 1,000 more people per year to prison costing \$44 million annually, plus \$150 million for new prison construction--with no funding for treatment, harm reduction, or recovery supports, pulling General Fund dollars from like education and Medicaid.

CCJRC will be organizing statewide to educate voters on Initiative #85--just one of a number of regressive proposals expected on next year's ballot (many of them also backed by Advance Colorado) from harsher theft penalties and forced cooperation with ICE to anti-trans measures, clean-energy rollbacks, and tax cuts that worsen the state's fiscal situation.

There's still a long road ahead before the final 2026 ballot is set, but CCJRC will keep you informed every step of the way.

2026 LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

The 2026 legislative session begins on January 14, and it will be a pivotal year in Colorado's fight to stop prison expansion. We'll need your help, to move good legislation forward--and push back against harmful proposals. This year, CCJRC is advancing two key bills:

Strengthening Prison Population Management Measures (PPMM)

PPMM passed unanimously in 2018 and triggers specific actions aimed at lowering the prison population. The law is intended to manage the population to prevent overcrowding rather than adding more prison beds. We're working to tighten the law so it can function as intended.

Reforming Restitution Practices

CCJRC is partnering with Stand for Children to advance long-overdue restitution reform. Under current law, when an insurance company pays out a claim, the court can order the defendant to pay restitution directly to that company and charge 8% interest annually on the remaining balance. The result is a system where insurance companies triple-dip: they collect premiums, receive restitution, and earn interest for doing the job they're already paid to do.

Finally, we must protect state funding for the Community Reinvestment Initiatives CCJRC helped create, which support reentry services, victim assistance, and community-based crime prevention. The Transforming Safety program is at risk of cuts by the Joint Budget Committee despite strong results through small-business loans and targeted community grants. We'll need your help to defend this program and maintain funding for WAGEES and Community Crime Victim Services.

We'll share details once bills are introduced.

DOC Budget: First Look

On October 30th, the Department of Corrections submitted its proposed FY26-27 budget to the Joint Budget Committee. We're still analyzing the full request, but here are key highlights:

DOC is requesting a \$60 million increase for:

- **\$14.5M** – a 20% increase in the rate paid to CoreCivic, which operates two for-profit prisons
- **\$8.2M** – 553 additional prison beds
- **\$6.8M** – Increased costs for medical care, food, and laundry
- **\$3.3M** – Technology updates to the Offender Management Information Systems
- **\$0.7M** – Broadband installation at Trinidad Correctional Facility

DOC also offered \$10 million in potential budget cuts, called “Offset Savings”:

- **\$2.3M** – reducing DOC's share of phone costs to 75%
- **\$3.7M** – reductions from transgender healthcare due to overestimates
- **\$4M** – miscellaneous overestimations and unused grant funds

Grand Total: \$50 million increase to \$1.24 billion.

This total does not include DOC's requests for maintenance projects or a four-year, \$27 million construction project to add perimeter fences at the Level I prisons in Delta and Rifle.

These increases deepen concerns that rather than addressing inefficiencies driving population growth, this budget doubles down on expanding capacity instead of solving root problems.

What's Next:

CCJRC and the No More Prisons Coalition will be mobilizing our members to:

- Support bills strengthening PPMM and restitution reform
- Oppose 553 additional prison beds (\$8.2M)
- Oppose the private prison per diem increase (\$14.5M)
- Protect funding for community grant programs
- Organize statewide to educate voters about 2026 ballot initiatives

This is the moment.

Next year will bring one of Colorado's biggest fights in decades—on prisons, public safety, and whether we invest in communities or repeat the same failures. We need community to show up, speak out, and refuse to let Colorado slide backward.

It's time to get loud, get organized, and make it clear: Colorado doesn't need more prisons, harsher penalties, or political fear-mongering. Colorado needs justice, investment, and real safety solutions. Keep an eye out for more updates and calls to action from CCJRC!

We Did It! Denver Invested \$6.1 Million in Community-Led Safety

by: Kym Ray-

CCJRC Denver Campaign Coordinator

We are excited to share a major victory: the Denver budget process is officially complete, and the city will invest \$6.1 million over the next two years in grants for community-led safety. This historic win happened because of you.

Every member who testified, organized, emailed City Council, showed up, or shared this campaign's message played a critical role. This is not a symbolic victory, it is structural change, and it belongs to all of us.

Together, we challenged the idea that public safety only happens after

harm. We lifted up a vision rooted in prevention, connection, and care, and City leaders listened. Denver City Council voted unanimously to send the Mayor a budget amendment supporting the Community-Led Safety Grant Program, and with the Mayor's acceptance, this funding is now secured in the 2026 budget.

We are deeply grateful to our champions on City Council — Councilwomen Torres, Gonzales-Gutierrez, Lewis, and Parady — who worked alongside us and behind the scenes to make this possible. Their leadership and partnership reflect what is possible when elected officials stand with community.



Councilwoman Jamie Torres and CCJRC's Kym Ray

This victory is more than funding. It represents a shift in how Denver invests in safety. It affirms that prevention, intervention, and victim support are essential to increasing public safety, and that the people closest to the harm are also closest to the solutions.

For decades, most public safety dollars have gone to systems that respond after harm. Meanwhile, community organizations that prevent violence, mentor youth, de-escalate conflict, support families, and create healing spaces have been underfunded. This investment begins to correct that imbalance.

The \$6.1 million will support the strategies Get Real Denver members have championed from the beginning: youth mentoring, violence interruption, trauma-informed care, and relationship-based community work that actually reduces harm. In short: it moves money toward what truly keeps people safe.

This moment wasn't inevitable, it was earned through months of organizing, testimony, storytelling, and collaboration. A unanimous vote and mayoral approval don't happen by accident. They happen when community refuses to be ignored.

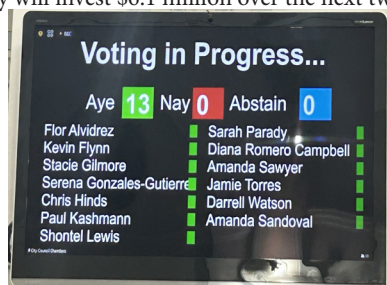
Now, the next steps begin. The City will pass an ordinance to establish the



“Get Real Denver” Supporters

framework for the grant program, followed by the selection of a community-facing, third-party intermediary to manage and distribute the funds. We will stay actively engaged and keep you informed throughout the process. While \$6.1 million is a powerful breakthrough, it is only a small portion

continued on page 3



Unanimous Vote! For Community Led Safety

of Denver's overall public safety spending. Our work continues to ensure community-led safety becomes permanent, expanded, transparent, and community-driven.

Thank you for every email, every conversation, every turnout push, every meeting, and every ounce of persistence. The amendment was accepted. The budget is finalized. And this two-year investment in real community safety happened because you made it impossible to ignore. This is a milestone. And it's only the beginning of what we will continue building together.



"Get Real Denver" Campaign Signage



CCJRC's "Get Real Denver" Bus Stop Campaign

Mobilizing the No More Prisons Coalition

by Manige Blackburn-Giles, CCJRC Community Organizer

The Department of Corrections' (DOC's) current budget has grown to more than \$1.2 billion (yes, with a 'B') dollars. For next fiscal year, the DOC is asking for even more money to the tune of \$8.3 million dollars for more beds and \$14.5 million dollars to increase private prison payments; while the state is faces a serious budget crisis. This fall, the state cut funding for higher education, adult dental care, behavioral health, reproductive health, and clean water programs for children, just to name a few. Next year deeper cuts will be needed - to the tune of \$800 million. As a state, everyone is being asked to do more with less, except DOC.

DOC is trying to justify these requests based on growth in the prison population, but it is reinventing a very expensive wheel when in 2018 lawmakers unanimously passed Prison Population Management Measures (PPMM). This law says that when prisons stay too full for too long, the DOC and Parole Board must take steps to ease overcrowding, such as speeding up parole releases for people who are already approved by the Parole Board and use open community corrections beds.

Rather than following the law, DOC recklessly avoided it as long as they could by delaying transport of people from jail to prison. This saddled the problem on county sheriffs who raised the alarm that increasing in the jail population passed the safety crisis on to them.

DOC then used this manufactured 'crisis' to ask for even more money to expand when they cannot maintain staffing in the prisons they have. The people of Colorado suffer, the people in prison suffer, the sheriffs and people in jail suffer, but DOC collects a bigger check from the state?

There are free or low cost ways to reduce overcrowding right now, while protecting safety for our communities, people in prison, DOC staff and people in jail to the state budget.

Now is the time for ALL of us to act. In September, the No More Prisons Coalition mobilized to oppose DOC's request for more private prison beds – and came within one vote of defeating it! In the 2026 legislative session, we must build on that momentum. We must hold DOC accountable so we can afford to invest in people, families, and neighborhoods. We must show up and ask the hard questions. We must look at the situation factually. If there are tools to manage the prison population, WHY DOES DOC NEED MORE MONEY in 2026??

Make it make sense. Oh, right, we can't.

If you are part of an organization or faith community that would like to join the No More Prison Coalition, contact Manige at manige@ccjrc.org.

Colorado children fight for the "right to hug" their incarcerated parents

By Susan Li, Civil Rights Corps

In October, children in Adams County, Colorado sued the County and the prison telecom company HomeWAV to restore in-person, contact visits at the jail. The lawsuit argues that Adams County and HomeWAV conspired to profit off of the elimination of contact visits.

Adams County has banned family visitation in the jail since at least 2006. Like hundreds of facilities across the country, nearly all Colorado jails have eliminated face-to-face visitation. Children have no way of seeing, hugging, being held by, or touching their jailed parents, who may be incarcerated for weeks, months, or even years. This means family members are forced to pay for expensive phone and video calls, while private telecom companies and the jails rake in the profits.

In October, children whose parents are jailed in the Adams County Detention Facility sued the County, Sheriff, and jail/prison telecommunications company HomeWAV. Plaintiffs argue that children have a fundamental right to familial association under the Colorado Constitution: a right to hug their parents. The families allege that the County, Sheriff, and HomeWAV conspired to profit from banning visits. This case, the third in the larger Right 2 Hug project, is litigated by Public Justice, Civil Rights Corps, Maxted Law, LLC, Spero Justice Center, Singleton Schreiber, LLP and the National Center for Youth Law.

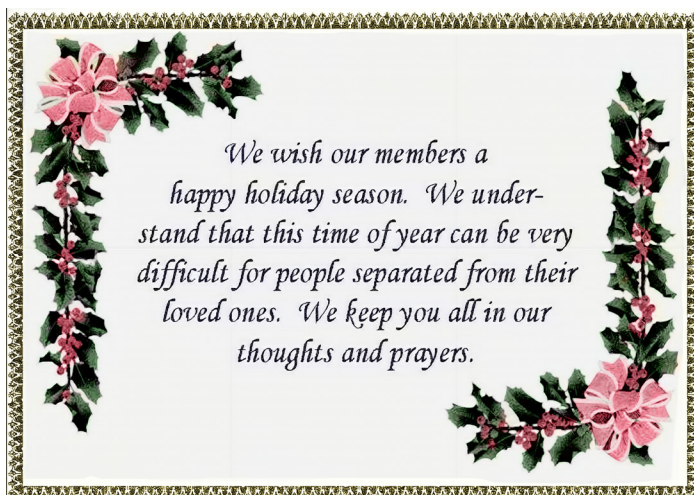
More than one-third of families with incarcerated relatives go into debt to cover the cost of staying in touch. Poor, low-income, Black, and brown families disproportionately bear this burden. Meanwhile, Adams County raked in nearly a million dollars in HomeWAV call commissions in 2024 alone—money extracted directly from impacted families and communities. The lawsuit aims to end the in-person, contact visit ban in Adams County so children can hug their parents and families don't have to go into debt just from talking to their loved ones.

The lawsuit is in the early stages and CCJRC will keep you updated. If you want to share your experience or know of other jails who have banned contact visitation, go to www.right2hug.org/contact.



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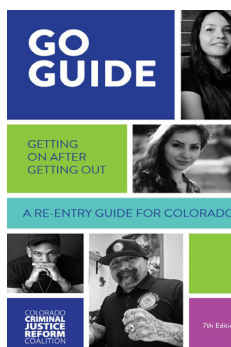
Check Them Out! – R&R Head Labs (Denver)



Founded in 2024, R&R Head Labs is a barber-shop built around hiring justice-impacted individuals, many of whom were formerly incarcerated. In addition to tapping into their deep barbering expertise developed while cutting hair in prison, R&R helps their barbers build careers that allow them to provide for themselves, their families, and build healthier communities through their work.

R&R's mission is to 'Inspire Personal Growth.' It's easy to see how this applies to barbers recently released from prison. However, their mission also extends to their customers. For many people that have not knowingly interacted with formerly incarcerated people, getting a haircut at R&R often helps them see that people are far more than the worst thing they've ever done. Their barbers are intelligent, funny, loyal, caring, artistic. You name it. Bridging the gap between people from different backgrounds creates understanding, empathy, and ultimately stronger communities.

You can support R&R by visiting their flagship location at 2260 E. Colfax Ave, Denver, CO 80206, or learn more about them on their website (www.RRHeadlabs.com). R&R is also opening their second location in Wash Park (Denver) at the intersection of Alameda and S. Pennsylvania in early January. R&R has big plans to grow throughout Denver, then nationally. With 15-20 barbers and 4-6,000 customers per shop, that's a lot of impact!



CCJRC Go Guide 7th Edition

We are just putting the final touches on the 7th edition of the Go Guide and are looking forward to publishing before the end of the year. We will keep everyone up to date!