

**UNHEARD VOICES OF BOULDER, COLORADO:
AMPLIFYING STORIES OF UNHOUSED INDIVIDUALS IN OUR COMMUNITY**

By

Lindsay Shermeta

A Departmental Honors Thesis

Submitted to the College of Media, Communication, and Information Sciences

University of Colorado, Boulder

In Fulfillment of the Requirements for Honors Designation

April 2024

Thesis Committee:

Diane Elliston, Assistant Teaching Professor, Department of Advertising, Public Relations and
Media Design, M.F.A, Thesis Advisor

Jolene Fisher, Associate Professor, Associate Chair of Undergraduate Studies, Department of
Advertising, Public Relations & Media Design College of Media, Communication &
Information, University of Colorado Boulder, Ph.D., Honors Council
Representative

Elizabeth Skewes, Associate Professor, Associate Chair of Undergraduate Studies, Department of
Journalism, Ph.D., Outside Reader

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	2
Abstract.....	3
Introduction.....	3
Section I – A Brief History of Homelessness in America.....	5
Section II – Homelessness in Boulder Today.....	11
Section III – Actions Combatting Solutions.....	13
Section IV – Boulder’s Solution Strategies.....	22
Section V – Prospects of Progress and Boulder’s Quest for Hope.....	28
Section VI – The Essentiality of Empathy.....	32
Creative Project Overview.....	35
Project Rationale.....	36
Project Reflection.....	39
Conclusion.....	43

Acknowledgements

I am profoundly grateful for the expertise, support, and guidance provided by my thesis committee members. Their dedication and insights have been invaluable throughout this journey. I would like to extend a special thank you to Diane Elliston for her long-term support, patience, and feedback.

This endeavor was further enriched by the incredible individuals featured in the project. Their stories of resilience and strength have not only inspired this work, but will continue to inspire me. My heartfelt gratitude goes to Nikki, John, Phil, and Yuvan.

I would also like to express my unparalleled gratitude towards The Museum of Boulder, for their optimism for the project and for partnering with me to make the exhibit a reality.

Finally, I extend my heartfelt thanks to my family and friends for their unwavering support and encouragement from the sidelines. A special appreciation goes to those who donated to the project– this generosity was essential to making this project a reality.

Abstract

In Boulder, Colorado, a stark contrast exists just beneath its picturesque surface. “They want rid of me... But I don't have any money, so I'm not leaving,” shares Phil, a Boulder resident facing homelessness, shedding light on the complex struggle of those living on the margins in this seemingly inclusive Community.

This thesis undertakes a profound journey into the heart of Boulder, a city celebrated for its progressive spirit, to uncover a reality often overlooked. Beyond the picturesque lies a silent struggle faced by the city's unhoused population, whose stories of resilience and hardship are rarely acknowledged. This thesis not only explores the historical and contemporary landscape of homelessness in America, with a focus on Boulder, but also critically examines the local policies and community efforts aimed at addressing this issue. Through a compelling narrative and a creative project that brings to life the personal stories of individuals, the project challenges the viewer to see beyond the surface. This work serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of empathy, inclusion, and action in building a community that truly cares for all its members.

Introduction

It was a weekend in early October when I first stepped foot in Boulder, Colorado. The weather was idyllic. The sun shone brightly in a clear blue sky, casting a warm, golden glow on everything it touched. Despite being autumn, the 60 to 70-degree temperature kept me comfortably warm, making it an optimal day to enjoy one of Boulder's most sought-after attractions: The outdoors. I watched with wide eyes as people happily strolled through the streets, hiked the nearby trails, or simply relaxed in parks, basking in the pleasant warmth. Boulder's natural beauty was enhanced by the towering Flatirons in the background, their peaks dusted with the first snow of the season. Time and time again, my mom references this day to me— the day that I fell in love with what would soon become my new home.

Known for its beautiful views, upbeat downtown, college-town atmosphere, and the constant, collective strive to breathe in the fresh rocky mountain air, Boulder is a unique and special place to many. While Boulder is recognized for its stunning natural beauty and vibrant ambiance, it is essential to acknowledge certain aspects of an equally important, but largely ignored, population of the city that is quietly seen yet unseen alongside the picturesque scenery.

More so contrasting this natural beauty is the less aesthetically pleasing reality that on a singular night in January 2023, when it was negative 4 degrees in Boulder, 839 people were accounted for experiencing “literal” homelessness, a concept that will be explained in depth later on (Metro Denver Homeless Initiative).

While I naively thought that everyone felt the warm and inviting aura that I felt upon my first visit to Boulder, I quickly realized that individuals are being excluded from this narrative. Phil, a Boulder resident currently experiencing homelessness says, “They want rid of me. And

it's understandable. But I don't have any money, so I'm not leaving. I can't get my mind around how one deals with this. I can tell it's very bad, but I can't really adjust my thinking to do anything about it, so I've reduced my attitude to apathy”.

Although Boulder boasts numerous positive qualities, certain facets of the city and members of the community remain unnoticed. Its image as an inclusive and progressive community at times clashes with the actual experiences of its residents. Despite the prevalent discourse on inclusivity and concrete objectives aimed at tackling exclusion, the reality in Boulder does not always align.

It's crucial to recognize that there are laws and regulations in place that contribute to exclusivity, particularly in terms of housing, which in practice serve as barriers to creating more diverse and affordable housing options. It is my primary goal to amplify the voices and build an understanding of those who may not be included in Boulder's prevailing narrative.

This includes long-time residents who have been displaced due to rising costs of living and individuals who feel that the city's commitment to inclusivity is not always reflected in its policies and practices. Acknowledging these challenges is the first step towards creating a more inclusive and equitable Boulder for everyone. I will explore the unheard voices of those experiencing homelessness in Boulder, Colorado, while seeking to understand why these individuals and communities are disregarded, and contemplating lasting solutions to elevate their voices and needs within Boulder and society.

This study is an in-depth examination seeking to uncover both historical and modern factors contributing to the neglect of unhoused individuals and highlight actionable strategies to give these voices the recognition and platform for advocacy that they deserve. Understanding the trajectory of homelessness as a whole, and in regards to Boulder, ideally evokes lessons learned

from mistakes made in the past, ultimately uncovering empathy and understanding for those unheard in the community.

Section I – A Brief History of Homelessness in America

The scale of homelessness in the United States is a modern issue with deep historical roots. To understand the scope of homelessness today, we must inspect it through a historical lens. The origin of homelessness in America is debated, with some attributing it to the displacement of people during King Philip's War in the 1670s. Others point to the opening of the first Poorhouses in the 1730s in cities such as New York, Boston, and Philadelphia as the starting point. Poorhouses, functioning as homeless shelters, jails, almshouses, and de facto mental health institutions, emerged during the Industrial Revolution in the 1820s. Fewer than 7 percent of Americans lived in cities before the 1820s (Kim & Margo). Therefore, the rapid growth of populations in Northeastern cities during this time led to an influx of people on the streets and in search of work.

Historically, migration has a recurring theme of displacement, sometimes resulting in homelessness. This could be people moving into an area and struggling to find housing and work, or existing residents facing rising living costs. Cities responded to the rise of homelessness by creating laws intended to address the issue by banning activities such as loitering and panhandling. The formation of police departments in the 1820s marked a turning point, with police rounding up unhoused people at night and placing them in jails. Among the urban homeless were free people of color and runaway slaves seeking freedom and work in expanding cities. This is the enforcement approach that we still see today. Simple solutions, like arrests, were among the first attempts to address homelessness. However, such solutions are not robust

enough to navigate the complex issues of homelessness (Hughes & Adler). In 1830, President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act, which displaced tens of thousands of Native Americans, placing them on reservations throughout the country. What we remember today as the Trail of Tears foreshadows a pattern of legislation contributing to people of color being overrepresented in homelessness (University of Southern California).

The period following the Civil War saw the first establishment of nonprofits to serve the “less fortunate” and homeless, such as the Salvation Army, United Way, and American Red Cross. Before this, homelessness wasn’t recognized as a national issue, but rather a temporary situation. The 1880s represented a shift in the mindset of the nation concerning the matter of homelessness in the country (National Academies of Sciences).

Advancements in transportation, particularly the railroad system, in the late 19th century, led to an inevitable spike of movement between cities, resulting in even more displacement of people. Young men, riding the rails in search of work as a subject of the Industrial Revolution resulted in an alarming number of “Vagabonds”, which were put in lodging rooms located in police stations, essentially serving as a homeless shelter as we would know it in today’s terms. Efforts to address homelessness gained momentum in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with Congress allocating funds to investigate “urban slums”, which are overcrowded and substandard urban areas lacking basic services, in 1892 (Hughes & Adler). This was the first investment initiative the country took to work towards finding a solution. Furthermore, this was the first time the United States looked inward to locate and identify tactics that could address this complex issue.

In 1908, President Theodore Roosevelt formed a formal housing commission to continue these investigations (National Academies of Sciences). However, it was shortly before the stock market crash of 1929 that unfortunately diverted these priorities for obvious economic reasons.

Between 1916 and 1968, the practice of institutionalized housing discrimination became prevalent, including such practices as “redlining” and restrictive covenants that further exacerbated disparities for communities of color (Cornell Law School). While the topic of “redlining” is extremely complex in itself, it is important to touch on how it created housing discrimination, and as a matter of consequence— homelessness.

Redlining is a discriminatory practice that “Consists of the systematic denial of services such as mortgages, insurance loans, and other financial services to residents of certain areas, based on an individual's race or ethnicity. Redlining disregards an individual’s qualifications and credit worthiness to refuse certain services, solely based on the residency of those individuals in minority neighborhoods” (Cornell Law School).

This practice began when banks and investment companies expanded from their local communities, becoming regional or national entities. These institutions needed a way to determine the risk of lending money for mortgages in various neighborhoods through organizations like the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC). The Federal Government created maps of communities of every city in the United States, sectioning off areas that were very safe, moderately safe, and “hazardous”. From the 1920s through the 1960s, one of the reasons cited for being a hazardous place to invest money was “The presence of Negroes in the community”. In the vast majority of communities, areas with a high presence of minorities (especially Black people), were outlined in red and given the distinction “Hazardous”, solely based on race. So for nearly half a century, there were no investments, and therefore no

development in these minority communities. This is a direct exclusion of people of color from property and home ownership, and subsequently, from improvements in their communities. This eliminated the potential for a multi-generational accumulation of wealth—an opportunity stripped from people of minority groups, but handed to White people.

Presenting itself at the foundation of this timeline is The Great Depression of the 1930's in which the nation watched the homeless population erupt. A proliferation of shanty towns known as "Hoovervilles" resembling modern-day homeless encampments became prevalent throughout the country. Today, most of society sees the Great Depression as the height of the homelessness issue in the United States. Shockingly, in 2022, there were more homeless children in the United States than there were homeless people altogether during the entirety of the Great Depression (Hughes & Adler). The Great Depression was not the worst of our nation's homelessness, but only an artifact of the enormous problem facing our society today.

Fast-forwarding to post-World War II, returning soldiers faced housing shortages, leading to the establishment of the Affordable Housing System through acts in the 1950s. The post-war housing issues of the 50's brought to light the connection between homelessness and veterans, an ongoing complexity that often blended both economic and mental health challenges which continues to manifest dramatically with our US Veterans. Aimed at combating post-World War II housing shortages and poverty, the Housing Act of 1949, part of President Harry S. Truman's "Fair Deal", established the federal government's role in public housing to clear slums and erect new housing units for low-income families (Housing Act of 1949. Pub. L. No. 81-171, 63 Stat. 413). However, this approach eventually led to criticism for segregating communities and concentrating poverty, culminating in social challenges akin to modern-day Hoovervilles.

Two months following the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, and perhaps providing a glimpse into the growing awareness of the US Government, Lyndon B. Johnson stood in front of the Nation during the State of the Union address, where he declared a “War on Poverty” (KUNC). This declaration led to various legislative efforts aimed at addressing poverty, one of which was the shift in housing policy during the 1970s through the Housing and Community Development Act that introduced the Community Development Block Grant program (KUNC). This program moved away from the large infrastructure projects characterized by earlier efforts, such as the infamous Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis, toward housing choice vouchers, signaling a significant policy shift.

The precursor to these large infrastructure projects and the subsequent shift roots back to the Housing Act of 1949. Acknowledging the limitations and challenges of such large-scale public housing initiatives, the Community Development Block Grant program sought to grant local governments the flexibility to address housing and community development needs in a manner tailored to their specific contexts. This shift towards housing choice vouchers was a direct response to the failures of previous policies, aiming to provide low-income individuals and families with greater mobility and the opportunity to live in diverse communities, rather than confining them to segregated and impoverished neighborhoods.

The Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Act of 1977, often referred to as the McKinney Vento Act, defined homelessness for the first time, and established legislation surrounding homeless integration, especially in regards to children and schools. The McKinney-Vento definition, which is still widely used today, states that “Any person who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence is homeless” (Colorado Department of Education).

The 1980s witnessed a substantial spike in homelessness in the United States, marking “The emergence of what now may be considered the modern era of homelessness” (National Academies of Sciences). Major forces in the complexion of homelessness include economic factors such as high unemployment rates and inflation rates, along with the deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill. This economic crisis occurred in the 1970’s, due to what was the country's worst recession since the Great Depression.

The country saw a significant increase in homeless individuals with mental illnesses following the release of the mentally ill from institutions in 1984. This traces back to a series of policy changes and legislation that began in the 1960s, actually positioned to better support individuals with mental illness. The genesis of this shift was the Community Mental Health Act of 1963, signed into law by President John F. Kennedy, a piece of legislation aimed at transforming the treatment of mental illness in the United States. It proposed a divergence from institutionalization, advocating for the establishment of community-based treatment centers. (National Academies of Sciences).

As it’s becoming abundantly clear, the causes of homelessness are exceedingly complex. Throughout history, we have seen racial discrimination, poverty, eroding work opportunities, a lack of affordable housing, and a decline in public assistance that have all contributed to what is modern-day homelessness. The complexities of these issues underscore the difficulty in addressing and finding comprehensive solutions to an ongoing and worsening problem of homelessness in the United States.

Section II – Homelessness in Boulder Today

Boulder's homeless population is one of the city's most prominent and enduring problems in the community. Even with the notably growing affluence of the city, a significant number of individuals are without a permanent place to live. The lack of affordable housing options and restricted access to essential amenities only scratch the surface of many obstacles faced by the homeless. While the city makes efforts to address homelessness, a substantial portion of the community still struggles to make ends meet. These are hundreds to thousands of voices being overlooked.

First, it is essential to understand the complexities and difficulties of counting statistics of any unhoused population due to various reasons. The transient nature of homelessness, people living in unconventional places making them hard to locate, and the negative stigma associated with homelessness all contribute to the difficulties in obtaining accurate and comprehensive data.

It is also critical to consider the individuality and feelings of unhoused people. Often there exist trust issues, fear of legal consequences, and mental health challenges that have impacts on the individual's decisions or ability to access housing options.

As far as data collection itself goes, there is a general lack of resources, reliance on self-reporting and volunteers, count methodology, and participation in rural communities. Therefore, while the statistics to be presented in this subsection are derived from reliable sources, there is an unavoidable realm of unreliability within these specific statistics. For instance, in 2022, the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless approximated between 10,000-53,000 individuals experiencing homelessness statewide, the bottom of the range being the total number of Coloradans experiencing homelessness according to PIT Count, and the top being people without

stable housing covered by Medicaid in 2019 (CCH). While these numbers are vast, we are aware of the scope of difficulty in collecting these statistics. Quantifying the exact number of individuals who are unhoused in one area is unattainable. This is why data surrounding this topic should be constructed and looked at as a “snapshot” of the current levels of homelessness in a given area.

One night in January each year, The Metro Denver Homeless Initiative conducts the Point in Time (PIT) Count, as mentioned in the paper’s introduction. The PIT Count is an annual, unduplicated count of people experiencing literal homelessness on a single night in January. “HUD defines literal homelessness as living in a place not meant for human habitation, emergency shelter, or some transitional housing programs”. If we recall, this definition differs from that of the McKinney-Vento Act. Therefore, the PIT does not consider “Persons at risk” of becoming homeless (such as those staying with friends or family or staying in a motel), or Migrant only shelters (MDHI), which both could present a great number of individuals who are experiencing homelessness but aren’t accounted for in this instance. This year, The PIT Count in Boulder County accounted for 839 people experiencing “literal” homelessness. Nearly half were staying in Emergency Shelters, leaving the rest of these human beings unsheltered. One of two of these individuals was experiencing homelessness for the first time (MDHI). As a refresher, on the night of January 30, 2023, it was negative four degrees in Boulder.

Most minority groups, especially African Americans and Indigenous people, experience homelessness at higher rates than White people on a national level, largely due to long-standing historical and structural racism discussed in Section I. In considering the demographics of those experiencing homelessness specifically in Boulder, this truth still stands, even in regards to the PIT Count, which as we know, likely overlooks several unhoused individuals. Native Hawaiians

or Pacific Islanders in Boulder County are 8 times more represented in homelessness relative to their makeup of the general population in Boulder. The same is true for those identifying as Black or African American being five and a half times overrepresented, nearly four times for Native Americans or Alaska Natives, and two and a half times for Multi-Racial individuals. Not only is there overrepresentation of minorities, but in health concerns and other characteristics, directly reemphasizing the discussed historical context. 32% of these individuals have mental health concerns, 23% with a physically disabling condition, and 22% of them have substance abuse issues. Additionally, 5% of unhoused individuals in Boulder are war veterans, alluding directly to post-WWII housing issues. (MDHI).

Section III – Actions Combatting Solutions

In the heart of Boulder in late March 2023, Boulder High School student-athletes were practicing on Christian Recht Field. Around 4:30 that afternoon, there were reports of people around the area hearing “small explosions”. As the students evacuated the field, Boulder Fire-Rescue responded to a tent fire, discovering propane tanks “On fire and off-gassing” at the fire. The tent and everything inside were destroyed. The following Tuesday, the fire department responded to another tent fire near the same location, which in this instance spread to a nearby tree that got “significantly” burned. “From Wednesday night to early Thursday morning, the department responded to five more reports of ‘unauthorized’ fires — those in violation of the City’s permanent ban on open burns— in unhoused encampments” (Matuska). Subsequent tent fires near Boulder High’s turf football field and a surge in “unauthorized” fires in unhoused encampments signaled an unsettling reality. Marya Washburn, public information officer at

Boulder Fire-Rescue, stated that the number of fires in encampments was much higher than usual in mid-March of 2023 (Matuska).

March 2023 was concluded as the coldest March in Boulder in over 50 years. It was the fifth consecutive month with below-normal temperatures in Boulder— “This winter has been atypically long and brutal” (Castellani). Current Mayor pro tempore of Boulder Nicole Speer speaks to the concerning nature of the fires for *everyone* involved in our community, from the Boulder High School students to the individuals who are currently experiencing homelessness. “People need to stay warm if we don’t have shelter for them,” says Speer. “So if we don’t want folks to have propane tanks and things that are going to catch on fire, what are we doing to provide alternatives?”. Fundamentally, this spate of fires highlights Boulder’s homelessness problem and the lack of alternatives for people experiencing homelessness. “People are not going to stop being cold if they don’t have shelter” (Matuska).

Just as any parent would be, serious concerns were circulating in the Boulder High parent community, along with the parents of children in Boulder as a whole. Some parents of Boulder high schoolers took it upon themselves to address their safety concerns because of “the lack of leadership and lack of action” from the “City Council, City Manager, and Boulder Valley School District,” according to Safe Zones 4 Kids, a ballot initiative started by a collective of Boulder parents. Safe Zones 4 Kids was launched in October 2022 to create a designated "Priority Enforcement Zone." This zone includes regulations such as prohibiting camping and the use of propane tanks within 500 feet of school property lines and 50 feet from multi-use paths and sidewalks. Jennifer Rhodes, a parent to two teenage daughters in the BVSD system and a driving force behind Safe Zones 4 Kids, expresses that the ballot measure can shield kids from "harassment and other inappropriate adult behavior". She stated, "We [Boulder parents] don't

want to wait and see what happens while the City continues to ignore its prioritization matrix and ponder the issue for months on end" (Matuska).

Dismantling encampments is proven to be detrimental for those experiencing homelessness (Olivet). This prolongs the duration of homelessness, directly opposing the objectives of Safe Zones 4 Kids. Katie Farnan and Doug Hamilton, both parents of two kids currently in the BVSD schooling system, co-lead an initiative titled "Solutions Not Safe Zones", which challenges the necessity of the Safe Zones. They point out that firstly, these types of restrictions are already being enacted by the city, as there is already a law in Boulder against possession of propane tanks within 500 feet of a school– or in any public space for that matter. As of early September, 92.6 tons of material and 366 camps had been swept in Boulder in 2023. So essentially, by increasing the strictness of current enforcements as Safe Zones suggests, the City of Boulder would contribute finite time, resources, personnel, money, effort, and staff to something that we already know does not work. As a parent, Katie Farnan understands nothing more than wanting to ensure the safety of her kids. However, she states that policy that is driven solely by an emotional response, specifically "fear", is "bad policy" (Ogren). And if the central goal is truly meant to make sure children are safe, in the 52 words of the Safe Zones 4 Kids ballot measure, where does it compel the city to change its safety approach? There is no clear indication. Extensively, if the measure is focused on safety around school property, as the initiative sprouted from surrounding areas of Boulder High, this should be addressed specifically. Or if it was about all schools, then the BVSD schools (such as Louisville or Lafayette) outside of the city should be addressed. Lastly, if it is concerned with children in schools, why is there a restriction on all sidewalks in the city? As any legislative endeavor should, this measure does not "Draft the remedy to narrowly cure the harm" (Ogren). Boulder's Youth Opportunities Advisory

Board garnered feedback from high school students about their thoughts on Safe Zones— those to whom the motion directly pertains. One student believes that “It makes sense that unhoused people hang out at the areas near Boulder High — the library has good resources and why shouldn’t they take advantage of those resources?”. Another wonders, “If the unhoused aren’t allowed near places like Boulder High, where would they go? Is there a place for them? It only makes sense to make change if we have a plan for where people go and what they will do.” (Castle). Franan and Hamilton see the Safe Zones motion as a move that will weave the camping ban even deeper into the fabric of the city because if it is approved by city voters, it can only be challenged by another ballot measure.

The Safe Zones 4 Kids initiative’s Direct Democracy online petition reached over 3,500 signatures before the election, permitting its appearance on the City of Boulder Ballot in November 2023 (City of Boulder Petitions). With 61% approval, Boulder voters approved the Safe Zones 4 Kids measure (Boulder County Election Results). But still, the city of Boulder website directly mentions that “Designating a safety zone around schools would not add to Boulder’s enforcement toolkit because camping is already banned near schools and in all other public spaces,” given the city-wide enforcement of Boulder’s camping policy (City of Boulder).

With the approval of the Safe Zones motion comes the question of where these individuals will go once forced to move. In reality, if the police do strongly enforce the distance restrictions from Safe Zones for Kids, people will go elsewhere— as they have no other choice. This will only result in “additional camps, additional interactions, additional sanitation issues, and additional fire risks” (Ogren). The motion will either do nothing, bringing us back to the same conversations, or it will spur on temporary relocation, contributing to a never-ending cycle of sweeping, moving, and returning.

Since the early 1980s, Boulder has had a law in place that prohibits camping in public areas, such as parks, bike lanes, open spaces, and creekways. The law was reinforced in 2016 by the members of the city council and was expanded further by the council in 2021 to forbid tents and propane tanks in parks (Camping or Lodging on Property Without Consent Act, 1981). As we are aware of the tent fires that occurred earlier this year, the expansion of this restriction resulted in little to no progress. An ordinance often referred to as the “Blanket Ban” forbids living or sleeping outside while using “Any cover or protection from the elements other than clothing” (B.R.C. § 5-6-10(d)).

In early 2022, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Colorado, the state’s oldest and largest civil rights organization, filed a lawsuit against the city of Boulder challenging the "Blanket Ban". As we know, this ordinance criminalizes the act of sleeping outside with a blanket for the city's unhoused residents, making it a violation to live or sleep outdoors while using any form of cover other than clothing (B.R.C. § 5-6-10(d)). The ACLU argues that this ordinance is a form of cruel and unusual punishment, which directly violates specific articles of the Colorado Constitution (art. II, § 25 and art. II, § 3). The lawsuit asserts that Boulder lacks sufficient and accessible indoor shelter for its unhoused residents, making the enforcement of the Blanket Ban unjust.

According to the ACLU, this was enacted on behalf of several formerly unhoused residents, who were criminally charged under the Blanket Ban and face the ongoing threat of prosecution. Additional plaintiffs include a Boulder nonprofit serving unhoused individuals, and local taxpayers whose funds contribute to the enforcement of the Blanket Ban.

The City responded by attempting to completely dismiss the lawsuit. On February 23, 2023, the court denied this attempt from the city to sweep their wrongdoings under the rug,

asserting that imposing criminal penalties on individuals for fundamental life activities, such as sleeping with a blanket, constitutes a violation of the Colorado Constitution. Subsequently, on October 13, 2023, the ACLU of Colorado filed its second Amended Complaint, and the case is set for a five-day trial on August 12, 2024 (ACLU Colorado).

The Blanket Ban criminalizes Boulder's unhoused residents' right to exist in Boulder by targeting the unavoidable impacts of extreme poverty. Officers issuing criminal citations under the Blanket Ban have told the individuals to "Get out of Boulder" (ACLU Colorado). This is not only evidence of those unaccounted for in the PIT count as people seek shelter in locations harder to access, but is detrimental to those experiencing homelessness for several reasons. These types of bans leave a person who is unhoused with extremely limited options for finding shelter.

The laws discussed are essentially criminalizing homelessness, and punishing individuals for the lack of a stable living situation. A University of Denver study tells us that in 2014, Boulder issued more tickets for illegal camping than all other cities in Colorado *combined* (LaGarde & Warren). This approach exacerbates the issue of homelessness as a whole, and the challenges being faced, rather than addressing the root causes of a person's individual experience with homelessness. Criminalizing homelessness' lack of success has been demonstrated for the past 43 years through the mere fact that Denver is the latest among U.S. cities with the nation's worst homelessness issues to declare a state of emergency (Summers). Boulder has the second largest homeless population in the Metropolitan area, second only to Denver (LaGarde & Warren). The one homeless shelter in town, The Boulder Shelter for the Homeless, only has beds available in the winter and can accommodate up to 160 people at once. And in 2017, Boulder had twice the amount of shelter beds as it does now. It was a conscious decision by the city to cut the number of shelter beds by half (Williams).

Because the shelter does not have enough beds to meet the community's needs, they turn people away every day. Upon sending those in need away, they give them a blanket to help them stay warm— a blanket that they are *legally* not allowed to use.

The city's "overflow" bed capacity is provided most commonly by churches, which offer an extra 127 beds in the months of mid-October through May. Therefore, the city offers 280 beds in total to homeless individuals during the winter (LaGarde & Warren). In 2022, more than 1,000 homeless people in Boulder County registered through the Coordinated Entry program. This means that up to above 70% of people who are experiencing homelessness could have gone completely unnoticed, with no place to sleep night after night.

The Boulder Homeless Shelter is in the northernmost part of Boulder— on the outskirts. A location presumably difficult to access for most looking for a safe place to sleep, especially for people with disabilities. The shelter is closed from 8 am-5 pm, forcing residents of the shelter to find somewhere else to go during the entirety of their day. The shelter's intake hours are from 5-7 pm for both new and returning tenants. The shelter's current hours can be challenging for the residents, particularly for those who rely on the one free morning and evening busing access opportunity between the shelter and downtown.

Navigating the daily operations of The Boulder Shelter for the Homeless reveals a deeper layer of complexity for those relying on its services. The shelter's operational parameters inadvertently place a series of hurdles for those seeking shelter and stability, and it's within this context that the real-life implications of such logistical challenges become starkly evident, as shared by the residents themselves through their experiences.

An article from Boulder County's nonprofit news platform The "Boulder Reporting Lab" reveals insight into how those who live this experience cope. Matthew, 51, said people come

downtown to use the Boulder Public Library or get lunch in Central Park, where local organizations sometimes provide free meals. If the morning bus is full, people have to walk the approximate four miles downtown, and getting back to the shelter can be uncertain: “If you don’t make that bus at night to get up to the shelter, then you’re walking,” he said. “And hopefully you get there by 7 p.m. to get in. If not, you’re out on the street” (Herrick). It was 30 degrees Fahrenheit and raining when Bethany, 40, was waiting for the bus back to the shelter Tuesday evening. “On days like this, we’re sitting here getting sick because of the cold,” she said. “If people are sick, they can’t even sleep in” (Herrick). Shawn Breaux, 34, mentioned that he sleeps at the shelter and commutes to the library to seek employment during the day. He expressed that the job-seeking process would be more manageable for him if he didn’t have to depart from the shelter every morning at 8 a.m. and return by 7 p.m.: “There’s no employer in Boulder — or anywhere for that matter — that’s going to reasonably work within those confines,” Breaux said. “We’re not going to be able to find any kind of reasonable employment that actually gets us out of homelessness” (Herrick).

People who are experiencing homelessness are being severely constrained in their ability to fulfill a basic human need: sleep. Why and how we solve this need is convoluted, and in itself a challenge, to understand the implications one has to appreciate the options and related processes to consistently have this basic need.

To receive any type of homelessness support, including shelter, individuals must go through the Coordinated Entry program, a process in which the most vulnerable homeless residents are matched with available and appropriate housing resources and assistance, including sheltering, food, and longer-term services to stay in the shelter for longer than one night (Boulder Shelter for the Homeless). It is clear that there aren’t enough beds to support Boulder’s homeless

community. Boulder's homeless population has needs that are simply too significant for the city to provide on its own. One alternative for those unable to secure shelter in Boulder is "camping," or sleeping outside with no shelter, yet this option is restricted, as camping within Boulder city limits is prohibited. A "camping" rule that is being zealously enforced criminalizes homeless persons who have nowhere "legal" to sleep.

Every day, unhoused people in Boulder are turned away from shelters because there isn't enough space for everyone who needs it. Meanwhile, those who are homeless must make every effort to survive in both public and private settings. One could imagine the personal challenges that are presented when an individual is working towards change and cannot even find the simplest of basic human needs.

Across the United States, cities grapple with how to address homelessness, often resorting to measures that, intended to manage unsanctioned camping, inadvertently underscore a dehumanizing approach and exacerbate the challenges faced by the unhoused. This national trend of rigid policies heightens counted interactions with law enforcement, which increases the potential for conflict (National League of Cities), disrupts established relationships with service providers, intensifies stress levels among the homeless population, and often results in the loss of property (Olivet). Such approaches not only fail to offer sustainable solutions but also neglect the root causes of homelessness, revealing the pressing need for a more compassionate and effective response.

In Boulder, this national perspective manifests in tangible challenges for the unhoused population. Despite efforts towards change, the city's response mirrors the broader, punitive approach, creating a scenario where basic human needs are unmet.

Involuntary displacement additionally elevates the risk of death. A group of researchers from the University of Colorado Boulder Anschutz Medical Campus developed a model and a modeling study that looked at “The possible effect of moving people who are experiencing homelessness and who are using drugs away from services”. This ‘movement’ comes in the form of camping bans, sweeps, and clearances, which we are familiar with in the city of Boulder. Especially in the Boulder population which is struggling with drug abuse disorders, the study questioned what moving individuals away from support, even just a short distance, could mean for their health. Conclusively, “Camping bans, sweeps, clearances, etc. could lead to 25% of deaths among people experiencing homelessness who use drugs over the next 10 years” (Pieters). Therefore, Boulder's implementation of these policies has a direct effect on the lives of individuals.

This heightened risk of death is not limited to those using drugs. Consider Jessica Aldama, an unhoused, pregnant woman who was ticketed under the city’s camping and tent bans. She moved to a less populated area to avoid punishment, where she died during childbirth less than a month after being ticketed (Castle).

Section IV – Boulder’s Solution Strategies

“Our current strategy is not working.”

– City Council Member Matt Benjamin, 2023

With this statement, Benjamin captures a sentiment of urgency and a critical need for reassessment in the city's approach to a pervasive issue. This candid acknowledgment serves as a stark backdrop to the broader narrative of how both the city and state have grappled with

complex challenges. This transcends local efforts, signaling that the shortcomings are not only visible on a municipal scale but are also recognized at the state level.

There have been various actions made towards this issue of homelessness in Boulder, some of these being attempts for direct support, and some being restrictive policies and actions in an attempt to combat homelessness. Alas, none have succeeded. In considering strategies to build inclusion in the Boulder community, I began by taking a look into the city's support and resources for the unhoused as they stand.

Throughout these research efforts of related homelessness resources within Boulder County, at first viewing, there appear to be reasonable supports available that are instructive and straightforward, minding that this is with the assumption that an individual has ready access to the internet, which is not always, or even commonly, the case. The city of Boulder's website has a page dedicated to homelessness services. They give an overview of services available, which include ways and places to get help for single adults, families, and youth (City of Boulder). The first step when aiming to exit homelessness in Boulder is the *Coordinated Entry Program*, as discussed in section III.

Registering for the CEP is the initial action required for an individual to receive any shelter and additional services from the city. The concept of the CE program could be beneficial and helpful to Boulder's unhoused community for many reasons. Firstly the program purports to be highly committed to equal access to all individuals through the "screening" process and utilizes a person-centered approach when working with clients (Department of Local Affairs). The Coordinated Entry program was introduced by the city with the purposeful intent to make

significant strides towards auditing the number of individuals experiencing homelessness to provide them with suitable support.

However, the intent does not equate to the action, rather it unintentionally serves to restrict the entry point to obtain services. Let us examine this through a lens debated by Dan Williams, a litigation attorney who has notably contributed to the Boulder community through his pro bono work on civil rights cases and local governance issues, including representing the Bedrooms Are For People group and Sammie Lawrence (Castle).

Consider a person with a substance abuse problem who is living outside. If you have ever had experience with a person in your life struggling with substance abuse, you understand that you will be ready to help them when they are ready to be helped.

This can be difficult and frustrating, especially if the person will not accept the support being offered to them. However, being fully aware that this process is extensive. You create many opportunities for the individual to be able to accept support, hoping that they will soon be ready because you care about them. The City is mandating that the only way to have access to the aforementioned services is through a single entry point, which has left many more individuals still living outside. Coordinated entry aims to make it as easy as possible to reach support. However, to apply for Coordinated Entry, one must find their way to the *Age Well Center on Arapahoe* (roughly 4 miles from the Boulder Shelter). The center's operating hours are Monday-Friday from 10 am-4 pm, except for Tuesdays when it opens at noon and is closed on the weekends. Individuals must call 30 minutes before the center closes to be able to complete their application (Boulder Shelter for the Homeless). Given these rigid time limitations, it becomes evident that the City should reassess the operating hours of the Coordinated Entry point

to enhance accessibility, ensuring that those in need can more easily secure the support they require.

What I see as the most significant aspect of the Coordinated Entry plan and Boulder's Homelessness Strategy is the "Housing First" model (Boulder County). Housing First is an approach that prioritizes providing individuals experiencing homelessness with permanent housing, ideally creating a foundation that keeps individuals out of homelessness for good. The core principle of this approach is grounded in the idea that addressing fundamental needs, such as food and a place to live, takes precedence over less critical matters like securing employment, managing finances, or addressing substance use issues. Housing First is built on the belief that clients must be able to make their own decisions when it comes to housing and supportive service engagement. Empowering clients to exercise this choice is a major contributor to success in maintaining housing and making positive life improvements (National Alliance to End Homelessness).

Within the Coordinated Entry program, the Housing First model is stated as "A proven method of ending all types of homelessness and is the most effective approach to ending chronic homelessness". In Colorado's "Homelessness Strategy" which was created in 2017 and finalized in 2019, the importance of using a Housing First model's necessity and success is highly emphasized. In the city of Boulder's website the explanation of the city's Homelessness Strategy, the Housing First model is the very first point. The page states that "Boulder aligns its responses to homelessness through a Housing First philosophy. This approach is backed by significant national studies and is the only existing evidence-based solution for homelessness" (City of Boulder). The United States Integrity Council on Homelessness created a checklist for assessing whether and to what degree housing programs—and entire systems—are employing a Housing

First approach. The first core element on this checklist says “Access to programs is not contingent on sobriety”. You may not use alcohol or drugs in the Boulder Shelter. The list also highly emphasizes promoting low barriers to entry and service (USICH).

While the exact definition of "low-barrier" varies greatly, in terms of an unhoused shelter, it essentially means that the requirements for entry are limited or minimal. With a focus on "harm reduction," low-barrier shelters encourage homeless individuals to seek resources by eliminating those obstacles (Springs Rescue Mission). Fundamentally, this should be a place that opens its door for *anyone* who wishes to walk through it; a shelter where people are who they are and have what they have. Some notable aspects of a low-barrier shelter include access to the shelter at any time, i.e. eliminating any time restrictions for entry and exit. There's also the exclusion of the requirements for sobriety, program participation, and identification. As we are aware, the Boulder shelter has a strict time restriction, requires entry by participating in the Coordinated Entry program, and is a drug and alcohol free space.

Dan Williams, the attorney mentioned earlier, joined the podcast “Sharing Boulder”. Hosted by Philip Ogren, the podcast explores and dissects “Housing and land use issues in Boulder Colorado so that we can make this city more inclusive”. In the episode, “Dan Williams comments on low-barrier services for unhoused people” (Ogren). During the podcast, Williams discusses the following proposal aimed to mitigate the severity of homelessness in Boulder.

A group of service providers and directors from different organizations dedicated to addressing homelessness in Boulder submitted a comprehensive proposal to the City Council in 2022 (Williams). Their objective was to secure funding for the creation of a facility that could serve as a safe haven for unhoused individuals both during the day and at night. However, despite the well-thought-out proposal, the initiative faced significant challenges. One of the major

obstacles encountered was a lack of alignment with the preferences of Boulder's current city staff at the time, particularly within the Human Services department. According to Williams, the city's stance seemed to be characterized by a reluctance to cede control to the provider community. This resistance created a roadblock for the proposed project, essentially culminating with “no result.”

In contrast to Boulder, other cities, such as Houston, Texas, have demonstrated a more cooperative approach. In these places, city governments actively seek input from coalitions of service providers to better understand and implement effective strategies for transitioning people off the streets and out of encampments into secure environments (Greenblatt). Unfortunately, this collaborative spirit is not the case in Boulder, leading to a situation where the expertise and insights of the service provider community have not been fully embraced.

This underscores a missed opportunity for Boulder to leverage the knowledge and experience of those on the front lines of homelessness service provision. The reluctance of the city's Human Services department to allow more control to providers (such as the Boulder Shelter) likely stems from differing perspectives on the most effective approaches to addressing homelessness. Additionally, the city's government continues to stand internally divided on the issue, reflecting the division within the community as a whole. Council member Matt Benjamin says it's an “emotional” topic for divided community members, making already anchored opinions hard to sway, and he believes that is part of what's prolonged the problem. “Each side of the homelessness debate has to recognize that the other side has very valid points and that those needs still need to be met,” he says. “And quite honestly, each side has to be able to give and get for us to incrementally make improvements here” (Matuska).

An abundance of individuals have an opinion on what they believe are the best practices to “solve” homelessness in Boulder. However, how many of these individuals have connected with and attempted to truly understand an individual experiencing homelessness, let alone have experienced it themselves?

Bridging this gap and fostering collaboration between city officials and service providers could lead to more innovative and successful solutions for helping unhoused individuals in Boulder. Ultimately, the challenge lies in finding common ground and building a shared vision for addressing homelessness that benefits both those experiencing it and openly and honestly discussing the impacts on the community as a whole. Difficult as the problem is, and is emotionally charged as it can be, it is critical that a transparency representing all sides of this societal artifact is put forward to collectively be addressed in Boulder.

Section V – Prospects of Progress and Boulder’s Quest for Hope

In January of 2022, Boulder City Council stated their intention to launch a process to establish a day center for the unhoused community (Swearingen). This is to be a dedicated space for the unhoused to go during the day — something that hasn’t existed (other than during critical weather) in the city since 2017 (Harter). During the time of this announcement, the city held many focus groups and community meetings, mainly with non-experts of the issue (Ogren), trying to find a compromise plan that would better address the various constituencies. The city had made a plan to set up the center in an empty one-story office building at 1844 Folsom St., but, in a meeting in late September, the city staff stated that the owner and developer of the Folsom Street spot changed their minds and pulled out of the deal. A few months earlier, neighbors at Horizon West Condominiums, 1850 Folsom St., vocally opposed the center opening

in this location. Therefore, while there may be methods and ideas surrounding it, nearly 2 years following the initial idea, the city has presented the community with essentially nothing tangible in relation to this effort— until just recently.

As of December 12th, 2023, the city of Boulder has announced the long-awaited plan to open a homelessness day services center. The new location for the center, 4869 Broadway, is where the Boulder Homelessness Shelter stands. According to Michael Block, CEO of the Boulder Shelter for the Homeless, The Boulder Shelter was not originally considered as a location for the day services center, but it meets criteria for the city such as size, accessibility, affordability and proximity to public transportation. He told the Daily Camera that “We need to design programming and access that is going to meet (unhoused residents’) needs. I *think* we can do that up here. Time will tell, but we’re very optimistic that we will be able to create an environment that will provide services to folks who are unsheltered”. The current shelter as the location for this initiative was a seemingly last resort. However, I see this location as something that could be beneficial for those experiencing homelessness, as it quite literally compiles all currently available resources into one place (Herrick).

As stated by the city, their goal with the center is to consolidate a range of services in one accessible location (City of Boulder). Although the specific services are still unclear, discussions include amenities like bathrooms, showers, laundry, and meal service. Block underscores that the center will heavily rely on third-party partners, encompassing Boulder’s community court, Focus Reentry, along with mental and physical health service providers.

In October of 2022, the city conducted a survey gathering suggestions for the new day center from community members, service providers, and individuals with lived experience. This

feedback was compiled into a Community Outreach Report, highlighting the main takeaways from the community responses.

The core themes emerging from the feedback emphasize fundamental services at the day center, such as bathrooms, showers, laundry facilities, safe storage, meals, and accessible support from social workers, case managers, and medically trained staff. Suggestions also include mental health support and addiction counseling. When the city asked survey takers to consider success metrics, community members highlighted the importance of tracking reductions in encampments, transitions to housing solutions, decreased emergency room visits, and an overall improvement in quality of life. In terms of physical considerations according solely to the notes from interviews with people with lived experience, crucial aspects for the day center include accessibility to transportation networks, flexible hours, a judgment free and non-discriminatory atmosphere, diverse staff with lived experience, and to be visibly connected with the community. Identified gaps through online surveys, meetings, and interviews include the need for a Severe Weather Shelter, a designated space for safe drug use such as a supervised injection program, a transitional facility for mental health, and a sanctioned camping area (City of Boulder Housing & Human Services).

The shelter's current limited hours of operation were set in a management agreement that was approved by the city in 2002, and updated in 2018 (Boulder Shelter Development Review Application). However, the site will need to be open 24/7 in order for both the shelter and the day services center to operate there. On December 8, The Boulder Shelter applied to amend its land use and management plan. The Development Review application proposes several key changes to enhance the services provided by the shelter and better address the needs of people experiencing homelessness.

Firstly, the request to extend shelter hours: The proposed extension would allow the shelter to serve clients between 8:00 am and 5:00 pm as well as the current hours of operation, providing 24 hour assistance. The application suggests broadening day services and offering basic needs for individuals, as discussed earlier. The application completely and clearly edits the current management plan with the city, and proposes additional requests that are intended to improve unhoused individuals quality of life, ideally giving them the ability to utilize resources that will support them in exiting homelessness. The shelter suggests a year round capacity of 180 instead of its current capacity of 160 tenants, and proposes that day shelter entry and exits will be unlimited. Along with the tangible proposals of support from the shelter, their rewrite of the management plan represents a significant and positive shift in the treatment and accessibility of the needs of unhoused people as a whole. In section one of the plan, “Hours of Operation”, there is a clear language deviation between the prior and most recent application:

Hours of Operation – 2018 Version

“Check- in for overnight shelter will take place every evening between 5:00 pm and 7:00 pm. The Shelter will continue its strong policies that keep residents in the facility from 7:00 pm until the next morning. Any resident that insists on leaving the Shelter after 7:00 pm without pre-approval from Shelter staff will be in violation of Shelter behavioral policies.”

Hours of Operation – 2023 Version

“Operating hours will be up to 24 hours a day, seven days a week providing for services both during the day and overnight. General check-in for overnight services will end at 7:00 pm nightly. Residents who are pre-approved for late check-in may do so after 7:00 pm (for instance, late arrival due to work or referral by a qualified agency or service partner)”(Boulder Shelter).

Recently, Boulder’s service providers have created and presented significant avenues towards a more inclusive city for those experiencing living unhoused and steps to support individuals in exiting homelessness, such as non-profit organizations including the *Boulder Bridge House* and *Feet Forward*. The shelter has a handful of its own resources such as *The BTHERE Program* (Boulder Targeted Homelessness Engagement and Referral Effort), where the goal is to engage and build relationships with people experiencing homelessness for future connection to housing or services (Boulder Shelter for the Homeless). Now, it’s up to city officials if our community will take the road that has been paved. Staff in the city’s planning department will need to review and approve the application submitted from the shelter on December 8th. The City is conducting community engagement with nearby residents and will host a “good neighbor meeting” in early 2024 to hear community members’ concerns and adjust plans for the day center where necessary and hopefully effective.

Section VI – The Essentiality of Empathy

Belonging is the sense of being connected. It's not just a comfort—it's as essential as food to our survival and well-being. This fundamental human need, when unmet, leaves us feeling alienated from our environment.

The root of the complex challenge of homelessness is to design programming and access that meets the needs of unhoused individuals. The solutions require more than just temporary shelters or meals; they demand an integrated approach that considers the comprehensive needs of those it aims to serve. Effective programming must therefore be person-centered, ensuring accessibility and relevance to those experiencing homelessness. By focusing on personalized

interventions, we can begin to dismantle the barriers that keep people from securing stable, long-term housing.

The recent initiatives and plans in Boulder hold a flicker of light to not only the people in the community experiencing homelessness, and the community as a whole. The day center aims to support its current residents, as well as engage people who don't use nighttime shelters. One of the center's main priorities will be to administer connections to existing services like mental health support, job search assistance, and more. Despite challenges in adapting to new populations and establishing rules, funding from multiple sources, including the city's general fund and state grants, hope is maintained for a near-future opening of this integral space. As of late march 2024, The City of Boulder's Planning and Development Services Department approved a new management plan for the Boulder Shelter, allowing it to operate 24 hours a day and increase its capacity from 160 to 180 people (BRL). While an article from mid February states, "The goal is for the shelter to open by the end of winter, but Spencer Downing, chief housing officer at BSH, says spring is a safer estimate" (Harter) , The shelter currently, as of April 2024, does not have a firm date for when it will change its hours of operation.

As we look forward, the key question remains: Will these initiatives materialize into the meaningful change they promise, or will they falter in the face of bureaucratic and logistical hurdles? The answer lies in the commitment of our community leaders, the involvement of every community member, and the collective push towards a future where everyone has a place to call home. The path to inclusion and support for all members of our community, especially the unhoused, is both a challenge and an opportunity—a chance to redefine what it means to belong and thrive together.

Regardless, what is most essential is that we as a society continue to make active efforts towards inclusion. “At the end of the day, we need to be able to support unhoused individuals so that they can feel safe, secure and have a place to be while they’re working through trying to get back on their feet and get the services and support they need,” Williams says.

It's fair for Boulder to hyper-address a problem that has integrated its way into the community by the city’s own doing, intentional or not. Over time, policies and decisions made at the municipal level have contributed to the current situation, weaving the issue so thoroughly that it has become part of the fabric and character of the city— It has been accepted as a reality.

Given this, it's crucial that Boulder not only acknowledges its role in the development of this problem but also commits to a targeted strategy aimed at unraveling the complex layers of the issue. The Boulder community and it’s leaders must take a “Person centered, trauma informed approach that meets people where they are” (Barocas). We must begin by understanding the individuals who are experiencing homelessness first hand.

Throughout my research and project journey, I designed a four-step approach that begins with learning, which leads to understanding, which leads to empathy, culminating in action and solutions. Learning is the critical first step in this journey. This involves truly educating oneself about the realities of homelessness, beyond the stereotypes and assumptions. A successful learning experience requires a learning arc, and the willingness to explore and sit in the discomfort of newfound knowledge. This process evolves over time, laying the groundwork for genuine understanding. Understanding arises from this deep dive into learning, where the complexities of homelessness are acknowledged. It's about listening with an open mind and striving for a grasp of the unique challenges faced by individuals living unhoused. This understanding naturally progresses into empathy, a compassionate recognition of the hardships

and struggles endured by others. Empathy goes beyond mere sympathy, involving a heartfelt connection that motivates a desire to help and support. Lastly, empathy becomes the catalyst for action. It's the powerful emotional impetus that moves individuals from passive observers to active participants seeking solutions. In the author of "Inclusion Revolution", Daisy Auger-Domínguez's words, "Allyship is being willing to sacrifice your own comfort for the comfort of others". This means taking steps, no matter how small, to contribute to change. Not everyone needs to do the same thing; it's about moving forward, step by step, to do our own part in driving community change (Auger-Domínguez).

This four-part framework stresses the necessity of connecting with those experiencing homelessness on a personal, individual, and multifaceted level. To effect meaningful differences, it is essential to engage in a process that goes beyond implementing general and surface-level solutions, but rather delves into the depths of understanding the lived experiences of the unhoused. We must be open minded, listening and striving for understanding with an open mind. This issue should be approached not by solving what we think needs to be solved for, but what individuals experiencing living unhoused need us to solve for.

Creative Project Overview

As Boulder often falls short of inclusiveness for unhoused individuals, my project, "Unheard Voices of Boulder," seeks to amplify the voices that have been chronically ignored. This endeavor aims to foster a communal step towards true inclusivity by not just welcoming but valuing diverse voices, especially those experiencing homelessness. Through my literature review, I've identified a pattern of apathy that my project directly challenges by elevating these overlooked perspectives within the Boulder community.

While this project will provide a small set of insights within a issue that is larger than us all, my goal is to identify and discuss what I conclude to be the best practices in creating a space that offers a voice to the voiceless, an understanding and the less understood, and a platform of respect to the basic needs of members of the Boulder community.

The project will be presented through an exhibit and a hardcover book, both featuring photos, narratives, and interview recordings with Boulder's unhoused, aiming to foster empathy and a deeper connection. These elements, drawn from extensive interviews, seek to amplify voices traditionally marginalized in Boulder's narrative. The exhibit, placed in a local Boulder venue, will combine visual and textual elements to engage a wide audience, enhancing awareness and empathy within the community.

Ideally, a connection will be instilled between the viewers and the subjects, representing the large scale goal of understanding and empathy for *all* members of the Boulder community.

Project Rationale

“All humans, no matter where they come from, want to feel seen, heard, and valued.”

– Daisy Auger-Domínguez

The core of my creative project, *Unheard Voices of Boulder*, lies within this notion, which is one that I strongly believe and am continuously aiming to emulate when interacting with any individual. As a Strategic Communications: Media Design major, I felt a strong need to utilize the design skills I have gathered throughout my academic career for something greater, something that addressed the specific need of my community. I have always held the strong belief

that everyone should have an equal chance to share their story, and since I was young, I advocated for those individuals that did not have that opportunity.

I have chosen to use my platform to build on the importance of human connection and empathy— amplifying the voices of the unhoused community in Boulder. Soon after choosing my topic, I began volunteering at the Boulder Shelter of the Homeless on Fridays. I felt it was essential to immerse myself on the ground of the Homelessness issue in Boulder, along with supporting and understanding solutions with first hand experiences.

The essence of this project is twofold: firstly, to express that all individuals should feel as though their story is one of importance, one that others *want* to hear. Secondly, to urge people to take a step back, and to recognize that everyone, no matter who they are, has a unique journey which can be learned from. Using design and storytelling, I am trying to foster human connection and empathy, highlighting the importance of each individual's story.

The project began with interviewing and photographing individuals currently experiencing homelessness. The execution consists of 4 chosen interviews in which I found the most compelling. Using Adobe Illustrator, I designed 12 posters, three per interviewee. Two of these are photo based with stand out quotes from the interview, and one is text based with a summary of their story. These 22 x 34 pieces will be displayed in their own exhibition at the Museum of Boulder from April 20- June 17th, with small speakers underneath the boards in which viewers can press and listen to edited versions of the recorded interview.

The decision to compile the contents of this project into an exhibit, rather than opting for a digital platform such as a website, was a deliberate and strategic choice aimed at maximizing the project's impact. An exhibit offers a physical space where visitors can engage with the stories and artworks tangibly, as being in the same room as the artworks and narratives allow individuals

to feel a direct connection to the stories being told. This physical presence fosters a deeper emotional connection to the content, allowing visitors to immerse themselves fully in the experiences of the individuals featured. The tactile nature of viewing the pieces, pressing buttons to hear interviews, and walking through the space contributes to a more memorable and impactful experience than digital engagement might afford. Additionally, hosting the exhibit in a central, community-oriented venue like the Museum of Boulder ensures accessibility for a broad audience, including those who might not have ready access to digital technology or the internet (Such as some of the interviewees). It also situates the exhibit within the community context of the stories it tells, making it more relevant and poignant for local visitors and providing a direct link to the reality of homelessness in their own environment. The overall curatorial approach of the exhibit is tailored to create a specific aesthetic and emotional journey for the visitor, something that is not at conceivable through a digital interface.

I designed and created a physical book using Indesign, which contains photos, more in-depth stories of those interviewed, and my insights. This is a tangible artifact of the project, serving as a constant reminder of community empathy to those who possess it. The book will be for sale through a QR code in the exhibit, with an option to donate to The Boulder Shelter (Specifically the Boulder Targeted Homelessness Engagement and Referral Effort Program), and *Feet Forward*. Throughout my research, I became aware of many organizations and initiatives that support those experiencing homelessness. However, I chose specifically these two as both of which are organizations that those interviewed have a personal connection to. This reinforces the project's alignment with community betterment and its proactive role in making a positive impact.

I chose to create a physical book because it can be accessed at any time, allowing the narratives to be engaged at the reader's own pace, creating a more personal connection to the stories shared. It also serves as a permanent record of the project, preserving these important narratives for future generations. This permanence and accessibility are crucial for advocacy and raising awareness, ensuring that the project continues to influence and inspire change well beyond the lifespan of the exhibition.

In the interest of utmost accessibility, I created a [website that encapsulates a digital archive](#) of the project's content, which contains a page where the book can be purchased directly.

This project brings to light the stories and experiences of unhoused individuals in the Boulder community. Both tangible experiences will display these narratives, bringing the stories to life through text and photos. All of these elements: The exhibit pieces, interview recordings, and the book, work together to create a multi-sensory experience for viewers, allowing them to engage with the stories on multiple levels. While my focus is on Boulder, I believe that the need for all voices to be heard applies to any community, anywhere.

Project Reflection

Overcoming the challenges this project posed required persistence and innovative thinking. Initially, locating unhoused individuals willing to share their stories proved challenging, compounded by the understandable hesitation of many to participate and the inherent safety concerns associated with approaching strangers. To navigate these hurdles, I spent time in the community, not just as a researcher but as a participant, including my time volunteering at the shelter. This presence supported my endeavor to establish a sense of trust and familiarity, making it easier to approach and converse with potential interviewees. Recognizing the importance of

safety, all interviews were conducted in public spaces that provided a safe environment, and I always informed at least one person of my whereabouts. By addressing these challenges with a thoughtful and respectful approach, I was able to connect with individuals who were willing to share their invaluable stories, enriching the project with diverse and authentic voices.

Additionally, there was the challenge of cost and budgeting. Between interview equipment, venue rental, and printing costs, I knew the project was going to need funding. As the university's grant funds were given in February of the previous academic year, I took the initiative to crowdfund. I created a [GoFundMe page](#) which explains the project and the reasons for funding. The page is still live, and I have currently raised \$700 for the project. Again, any proceeds will be donated to the Boulder Shelter and Feet Forward.

Securing a venue for the exhibit emerged as one of the most formidable challenges in this project, which in turn eventually provided me with vital skills of resilience and resourcefulness. The hunt for an apt space for the exhibit was met with a series of barriers, from the high demand for event spaces in Boulder, which often led to them being booked at least six months in advance, to the prohibitive costs associated with renting such venues. Additionally, the location of the venue was paramount; it needed to be accessible and situated in a place that resonated with the essence of the project, ideally close to where the interviewees lived and the community I aimed to impact.

My search was extensive, involving countless hours spent online scouring for potential venues, followed by personalized emails to venue managers and coordinators, and numerous site visits. Each query was accompanied by a detailed proposal of the project, emphasizing its community focus, the potential for positive social impact, and how the exhibit could align with the venue's mission or values. Each rejection, including a particularly disheartening one from the

University, only compounded the challenge. At some points, I found myself questioning the feasibility of hosting a physical exhibit at all.

A turning point arose when I reached out to The Museum of Boulder, which is a local cultural and historical museum right off of Pearl Street. To recall two of the most important aspects in finding a venue: Location and an inexpensive venue rental cost.

Recognizing the value of the project and its alignment with its mission to showcase and preserve community stories for positive change, The Museum of Boulder offered a partnership rather than a traditional venue rental arrangement. This collaboration provided a prime location in the heart of downtown Boulder, and the opportunity to utilize the crowdfund in other necessary places. Furthermore, the partnership has come with the invaluable support of the museum, ensuring the exhibit could be realized in a manner that truly honored the stories of the unhoused community.

The challenging road to securing a venue space led me to the most ideal venue for the display of the exhibit. As their mission and vision directly state: “The Museum of Boulder showcases inclusive community stories, preserves them for the future, and inspires all of us to effect positive change. The Museum of Boulder will be a dynamic reflection of our community, a center where history is a resource for understanding our own lives and times” (The Museum of Boulder).

This experience has had a profound impact on who I am as a person, and how I will enter the world post-graduation. I have connected with people that I would never have connected with, gaining a new understanding and empathy. I learned about different groups of people in our community and gained new perspectives on both Boulder and society as a whole. Not only have I

enriched my understanding of resilience and community engagement, but have grasped the complexities of how I can address social issues as a designer.

I can say for certain that I will never see an unhoused individual the same way I did before beginning this project. Even then, when I noticed and said a quick “hello” to those sitting on the street, more so than my peers, my entire understanding and perspective has since been shifted. Perspective has become a large part of this project, and transitionally, to how I go about my life. When one puts their own life into perspective, stepping back and viewing it within the larger picture, is when empathy can be built.

Should this project extend beyond its current scope, I envision numerous avenues for its expansion and further development. One of my primary objectives would be to engage with a broader spectrum of individuals experiencing homelessness. While the timeframe of the project restricted its follow-through, I have been in contact with both Boulder Parks & Recreation’s Park Rangers and the Boulder Police Department, in regards to participating in a ride-along with city officials, visiting encampments in which most people don’t even know exist. Conducting more interviews would ideally come with amplifying their stories to a wider audience. I would achieve this through a social media page or campaign, fostering a community of support and awareness around the issue. Additionally, publishing the book remains a significant goal, particularly because budget constraints precluded this possibility. A publication would greatly amplify the project's impact, with a widespread distribution that could reach even those far removed from the immediate context of Boulder, fostering a deeper understanding and empathy towards the unhoused community on a global scale.

Conclusion

Unheard Voices of Boulder, rooted in the belief that every individual should feel seen, heard, and valued, has unfolded as a journey of deep engagement with the unhoused community of Boulder. Through the medium of design and storytelling, it has sought to amplify voices that are often marginalized, underscoring the universal need for empathy and human connection. The choice to manifest this endeavor through an exhibit at The Museum of Boulder, supplemented by a meticulously designed physical book, was driven by the intention to create a more intimate, impactful experience. This approach allowed for a tangible interaction with the narratives, fostering a deeper level of engagement and empathy among the audience.

The process of bringing this project to life has not been without its challenges. Each obstacle encountered on this journey necessitated a blend of resilience, creativity, and unwavering dedication to the project's core mission. These experiences have not only enriched my skill set as a designer, but have profoundly shaped my understanding of the power of storytelling in effecting social change.

This endeavor has fundamentally transformed my approach to design and storytelling, cementing my commitment to utilizing my skills for social good. The insights and experiences gained through this project have equipped me with a nuanced perspective on the complexities of homelessness, the power of empathy, and the potential for design to serve as a catalyst for positive change in society. As I move forward, I carry with me the lessons learned, the stories shared, and a renewed determination to continue advocating for the unheard voices within any community I find myself to be apart of, and to inspire those around me to do the same.

Works Cited

- "Boulder County Election Results." Boulder County Elections, December 2023,
electionresults.bouldercounty.gov/.
- "Boulder Shelter for the Homeless." Boulder Shelter for the Homeless, bouldershelter.org/.
- "Break The Bias." Podcast, Daisy Auger-Domínguez on Power and Using Your Voice.
- Burness, Alex. "Report: Conservatives, Low-Income Earners Feel Least Welcome in Boulder."
UWIRE Text, May 2017,
research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=6741c162-dbf2-3e6f-a19d-1c0060c1c4e6.
- "Camping or Lodging on Property Without Consent Act, B.R.C. § 5 6-10 (1981)."
documents.bouldercolorado.gov/.
- Carastathis, Anna. "The Invisibility of Privilege: A Critique of Intersectional Models of Identity."
Les Ateliers de l'éthique, vol. 3, no. 2, 2008, pp. 23-38,
www.erudit.org/en/journals/ateliers/2008-v3-n2-ateliers03570/1044594ar/.
- Castle, Shay. "City of Boulder Ballot Question 302: Safe Zones 4 Kids." Boulder Beat, 11 Oct.
2023, www.boulderbeat.news/2023/10/11/safe-zones-4-kids/.
- Castle, Shay. "Dan Williams Wants Boulder's 'Reality to Match Our Rhetoric'." Boulder Beat,
13 Sept. 2021, www.boulderbeat.news/2021/09/13/dan-williams-boulder-city-council/.
- "City of Boulder Approves Plan for Boulder Shelter for the Homeless to Operate 24 Hours a
Day." Boulder Reporting Lab, 26 Mar. 2024,
boulderreportinglab.org/2024/03/26/city-of-boulder-approves-plan-for-boulder-shelter-for-the-homeless-to-operate-24-hours-a-day/.
- "City Plans to Open Day Services Center at Boulder Shelter for the Homeless."

Daily Camera, 12 Dec. 2023,

www.dailycamera.com/2023/12/12/city-plans-to-open-day-services-center-at-boulder-shelter-for-the-homeless/.

Colorado Coalition for the Homeless. "The Colorado State of Homelessness Report 2022", 2022, www.coloradocoalition.org/state-homelessness-report.

"Coordinated Entry." Boulder Shelter for the Homeless, 14 Nov. 2022, bouldershelter.org/coordinated-entry/.

"Day Services Center." City of Boulder, 2022, bouldercolorado.gov/projects/homelessness-day-services-center.

"Feet Forward." feetforward.org.

"GoFundMe Page for Unheard Voices of Boulder, Colorado." gofundme.com/f/unheard-voices-of-boulder-colorado.

Greenblatt, Alan. "How Houston Cut Its Homeless Population by Nearly Two-Thirds."

Governing, 30 Aug. 2023,

governing.com/housing/how-houston-cut-its-homeless-population-by-nearly-two-thirds.

Gonyea, Don. "For LBJ, The War on Poverty Was Personal." KUNC, 8 Jan. 2014,

www.kunc.org/2014-01-08/for-lbj-the-war-on-poverty-was-personal.

Harter, Kaylee. "Under One Roof." Boulder Weekly, 14 Feb. 2024,

boulderweekly.com/news/under-one-roof/.

"Historical Perspectives on US Economic Geography." Brown University,

econ.brown.edu/Faculty/henderson/kim-margo.pdf.

Hughes, Emma, and Joe Adler. "On the Corner of Homelessness & Poverty in America." Jun 2023, Podcast.

Jones, M. M. "Creating a Science of Homelessness During the Reagan Era." *Milbank Quarterly*, vol. 93, no. 1, 2015, pp. 139–178, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4364434/.

LaGarde, Michael, and Paul Warren. *Too High a Price: What Criminalizing Homelessness Costs* Colorado: Boulder. University of Denver, 2015, www.law.du.edu/documents/homeless-advocacy-policy-project/Boulder-Spotlight.pdf.

Matuska, Will. "Ease the Harm." *Boulder Weekly*, 6 Apr. 2023, boulderweekly.com/news/ease-the-harm/.

"Metro Denver Homeless Initiative. Point-in-Time Count of Boulder County 2023." MDHI, 2023, static1.squarespace.com/static/5fea50c73853910bc4679c13/t/64be8b7d6a33b3021f87b686/1690209149991/Boulder+County+PIT+Factsheet+2023.pdf.

"Museum of Boulder." Museum of Boulder, museumofboulder.org/about/.

National Alliance to End Homelessness. "End Homelessness." endhomelessness.org.

National League of Cities. "An Overview of Homeless Encampments for City Leaders." National League of Cities, 2022, nlc.org/resource/an-overview-of-homeless-encampments-for-city-leaders/.

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. "Appendix B: The History of Homelessness in the United States." *Permanent Supportive Housing: Evaluating the Evidence for Improving Health Outcomes Among People Experiencing Chronic Homelessness*, The National Academies Press, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.17226/25133>.

Ogren, Philip. "Sharing Boulder: Episode 44: Dan Williams on Low-Barrier Services for Unhoused People." Podcast.

Olivet, Jeff. "Collaborate, Don't Criminalize: How Communities Can Effectively and Humanely

Address Homelessness." United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, 26 Oct. 2022,

[usich.gov/news-events/news/collaborate-dont-criminalize-how-communities-can-effectively-and-humanely-address/](https://www.usich.gov/news-events/news/collaborate-dont-criminalize-how-communities-can-effectively-and-humanely-address/).

Sanders, A. "Boulder, Colorado." Salem Press Encyclopedia, 2022,

search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,sso&db=ers&AN=146562714&site=eds-live.

Summers, D. "How Homelessness in Denver Compares to Other Cities." FOX31 Denver, 19 Jul.

2023, kdvr.com/news/data/denvers-homeless-compared-to-other-cities/.

University of Southern California. Urban American Indians and Alaska Natives Experiencing Homelessness in California: Strategies for Addressing Housing Insecurities and Substance Use Disorder. December 2020.

U.S. Census Bureau. "Boulder, CO." 2021, datausa.io/profile/geo/boulder-co/.