

# **A Denver MD has spent 2 decades working with hospitalized patients experiencing homelessness – here's what she fears and what gives her hope**

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Denver Health also partners on Denver's Housing to Health Program, a permanent supportive housing program launched in 2022 that aims to reduce health care expenditures for people experiencing chronic homelessness. A hospital team identifies eligible patients and provides "warm handoffs" to directly connect them with the program's housing service providers during hospitalizations or emergency room visits. While the evaluation is ongoing, it's a promising partnership model for how hospitals might collaborate to address homelessness.

## **Impact of federal policies and funding cuts**

With accompanying investments in proven solutions to homelessness, such partnerships have the potential to deliver better care at lower cost.

Actions taken by the federal government in 2025 that criminalize people experiencing homelessness, defund Housing First initiatives and dismantle Medicaid and other essential benefits threaten these partnerships and our progress. These policies will worsen homelessness, and patients will continue to be "housed" in the least appropriate and most expensive way – in the hospital.

In addition to harming patients, this trend is not sustainable for safety net hospitals like Denver Health that already provide millions of dollars annually in uncompensated care.

As a physician working at the intersection of housing and health, I believe hospitals are key partners in the fight to end homelessness. I've observed the hopelessness that homelessness can bring. But I've also seen how the right partnerships can transform a routine hospitalization into an unexpected opportunity for meaningful connection that puts patients on the path to housing and health.

Now when I see patients like Mr. D, I see possibility rather than another dead end for them. After all, for all their adversity, my patients' stories are also stories of beauty, strength and resilience. While the "cracks" keep me up at night, their stories, and the partnerships we've created, bring me hope at a time when hope seems in short supply.

Note: Patient initials and other identifying details have been changed to protect confidentiality.

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Sarah A. Stella, MD, works for Denver Health and Hospital Authority. She receives funding from the City and County of Denver, the Caring for Denver Foundation, and the Colorado Health Foundation.

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