



Swept to Nowhere

experiences and recommendations from unhoused people
during the COVID-19 pandemic

Why a Sweeps Survey?

Intent: This survey was conducted in order to 1) gather the experiences of people who are homeless who are directly affected by the sweeps, and 2) gather input from those directly affected about what could be done better.

Relation to Lyall Settlement: This survey was conducted roughly 6 months after the federal judge approved the settlement agreement in *Lyall v City of Denver* which, among other things, requires the city to follow certain procedures to protect people's property rights. This survey finds many areas where houseless people report violations of this agreement (as confirmed by the Judge in the injunction on the case) and also areas for small improvements to processes recommended by houseless residents.

Conducting the Sweeps Survey

The Sweeps Survey asked 29 questions about individuals experience with sweeps, storage, and asks for input on these processes.

This survey was developed by Denver Homeless Out Loud and conducted by volunteers who were trained to do so in an unbiased manner.

Survey sites were scattered across Denver, primarily at or around encampments.

150 unique people living without housing in Denver answered the survey.

The survey was conducted between April and August 2020.

What is a Sweep?

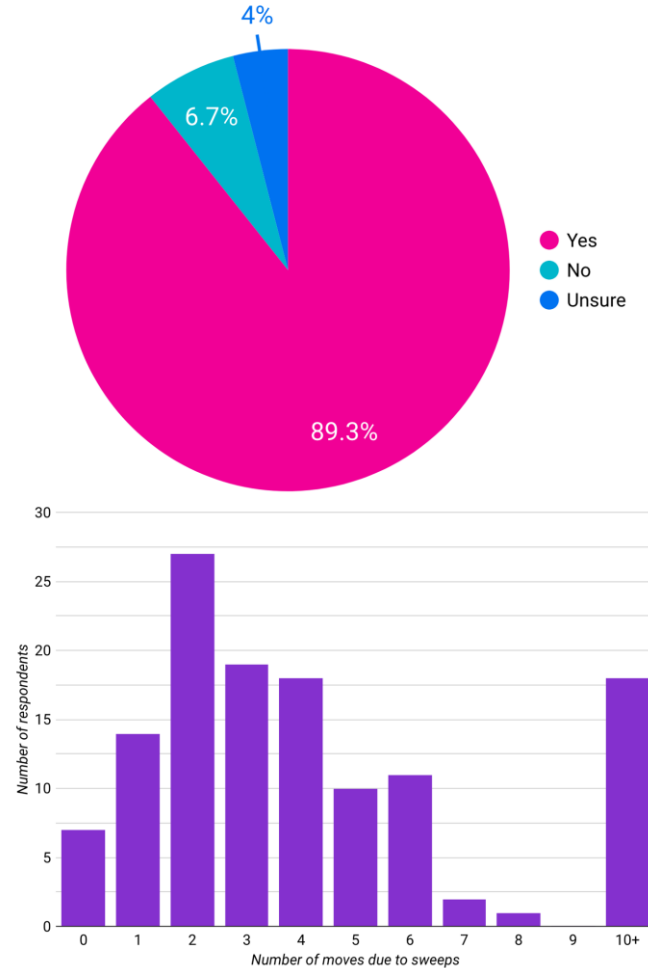
In the context of this survey a sweep was simply understood as a City forced removal of people and/or property from a location.



Prevalence of Homeless Camp Sweeps

Out of the 150 completed surveys, 89.3% reported “Yes” to having experienced a sweep or the city taking property away.

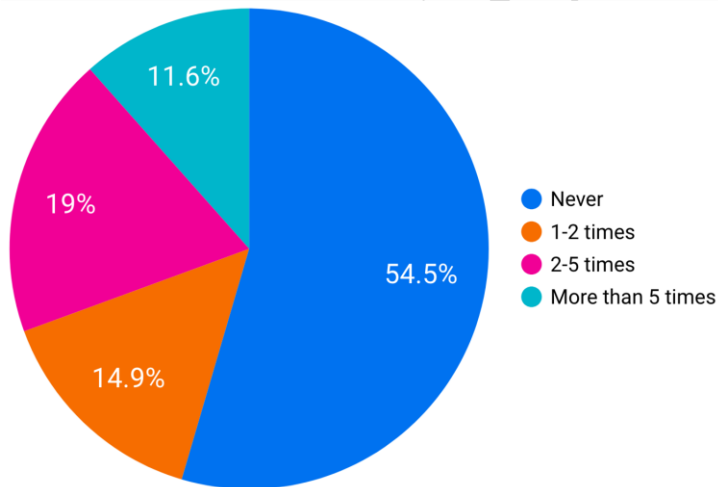
The number of times respondents experienced a sweep in the past 6 months ranged from 1-10+ times, with a median response of 3.5 times.



Effectiveness of Sweeps

When respondents moved due to a sweep, they most commonly reported (69.4%) moving to a nearby location. 25% moved to a far-off location.

The majority of respondents (54.5%) reported that after experiencing one or more sweeps, they never moved to a safe, legal place.



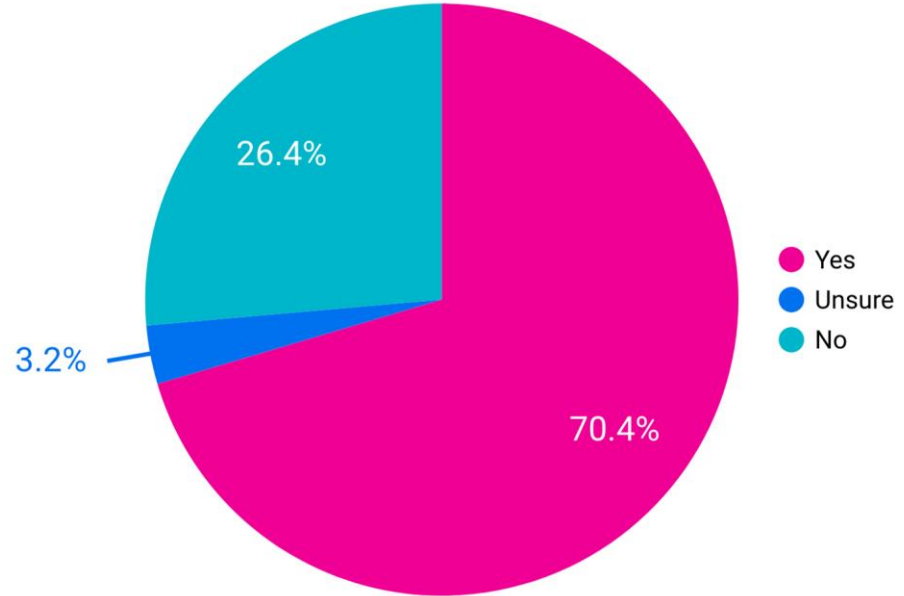
Effectiveness of Sweeps continued

Of the respondents who reported they did move to a safe, legal place after a sweep, these were the locations to which they moved:

Shelter 17
Hotel 12
Staying with a Friend 13
Housing 8
Other 45

Note: The majority of those who responded that they had moved to a safe legal place chose “other” (60.8%) and in their further explanation the “other” place they moved was actually another outdoor street camp that is not legal.

70.4% of respondents reported that they eventually returned to the location from which they had been previously swept.



Loss of Property

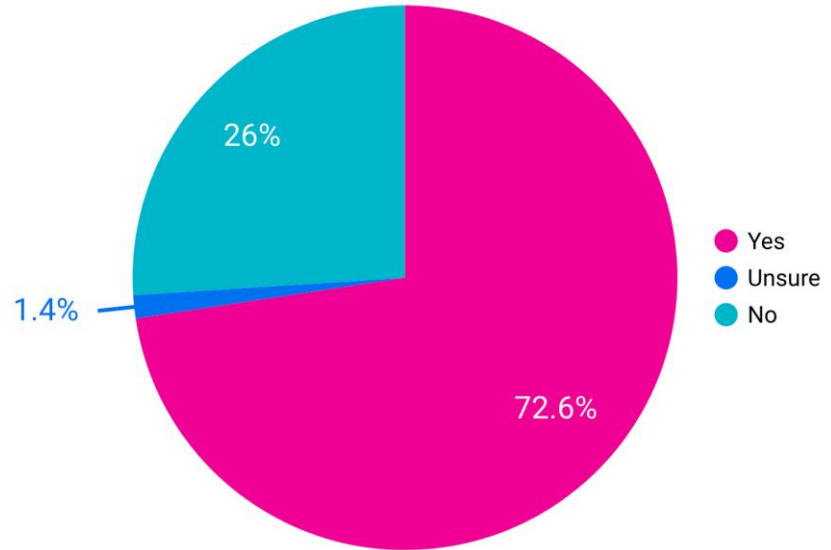
72.6% of respondents reported having property taken in a sweep.. Only 26% had not had property taken in a sweep.

The most frequent items seized included:

- Clothing
- Tent (home)
- Sleeping bag/gear, blankets, bed

-Other items included:

- Backpacks
- Papers, personal paperwork
- Food stamp card
- Pictures
- Phone, electronics
- Transportation (bicycle and bicycle parts, skateboard)
- Bible
- Guitar
- Family heirlooms, jewelry

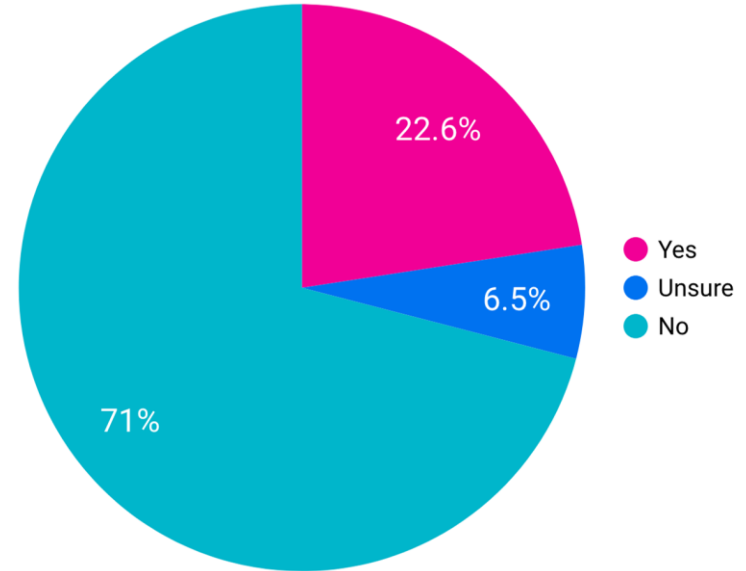


Recovery of Property from Sweeps

When questioned about recovering property that was taken during sweeps, **71.5% of respondents indicated that they did not know where the Storage Building is, or how to find out** where belongings were taken after a sweep to recover their lost property.

Of the 13.2% respondents who had called 311, only 28.6% of those who called reported that the 311 person was able to answer their questions.

19.7% of respondents had gone to city storage. However the majority of respondents (53.8%) who had visited the storage facility were unable to recover any property.



Notification / Procedures for Sweeps

Only 29.3% of respondents reported seeing notice of the sweep posted before it occurred.

Of the individuals surveyed, recommended placement for city notification of sweeps was:

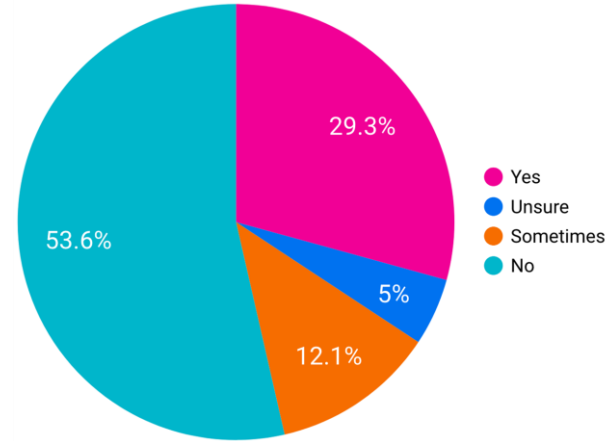
Attached to each Tent/Structure (66%),

Attached to Fences (49.6%),

Attached to Posts (40.4%),

Handed directly to people staying there (41.8%), and

Other (35.5%)



Of those who had received a 48-hour notice, over one-quarter (26.7%) did not have the city come to sweep at the 48 hour time frame.

Use of Police Tape (and Fencing)



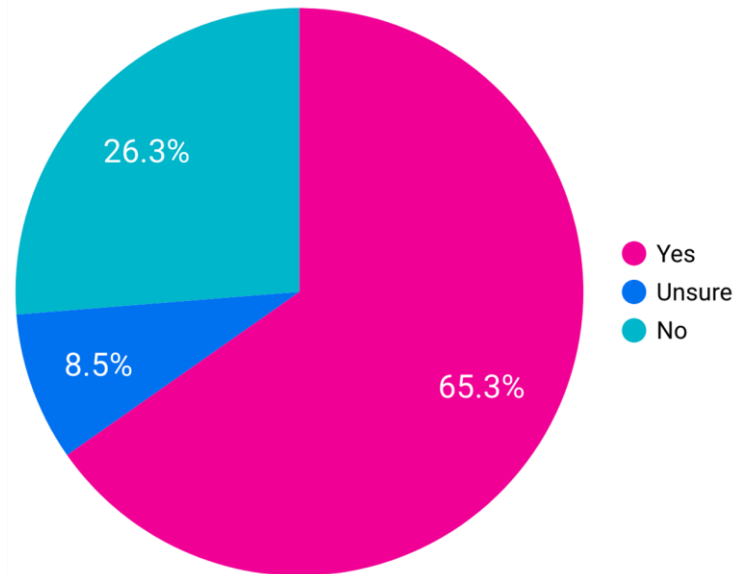
The majority of respondents (56%) reported that they felt negatively about the use of police tape at sweeps. Responses include: “Unnecessary,” “It’s not a crime scene,” “embarrassing,” “degrading,” “Not good if used improperly. Causes confusion.”

Note: This survey was done before the City switched to using fencing as opposed to police tape. People report feeling more negatively about the fencing than they did about the tape. Many expressed that the clinking of the fence was how they woke up startled and trapped. People express increased anxiety and inability to cope with sweep due to fencing and inability to move freely (like to go to the bathroom and return to their tent).

Effects of COVID-19 State of Emergency on Homeless Camp Sweeps

65.3% of respondents indicated that since the COVID State of Emergency has been in place, they have been able to stay more stable in an area without being moved by police.

Respondents cited “less stress,” “peace of mind,” “much nicer lifestyle, more humane,” “it’s better, no harassment,” and less loss of property.



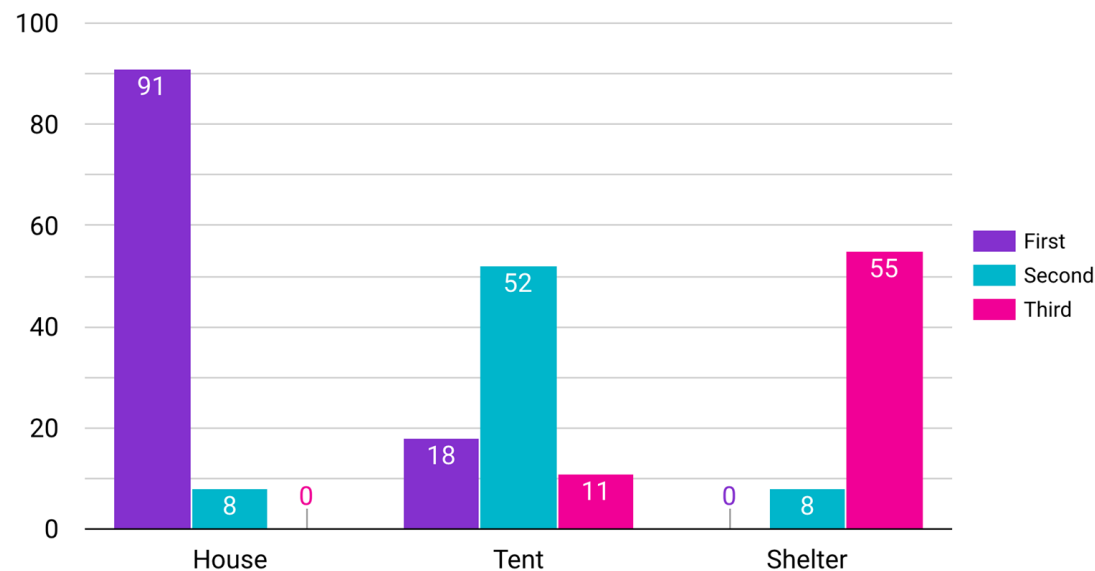
Moving Forward

When respondents were asked how the City should change their policies, **83.6% of them requested that the City should de-emphasize sweeps altogether, focus on finding better housing options/designated sites for homeless individuals, and focus police attention on strictly criminal activity (not criminalizing homelessness).**

Of the responses about how sweeps can be improved if they are happening, at least 15 individuals requested better communication about acceptable sites/practices for homeless camps, increased notification (length of time and visibility), as well as increased compassion/help/honesty from the officers performing the sweeps.

Moving Forward continued

When un-housed individuals were asked what their living preference would be out of the options house, tent, or shelter. The majority of respondents indicated that living in a house was their first choice, a tent was their second choice, and shelter was the third choice.



Policy/Practice Changes

Underlying Recommendations: End Sweeps, Replace with Real Cleaning and Sanitation Resources, Housing for All.

Following are the recommended policy and practice changes based on the input and experience of houseless people directly affected by sweeps and building on the agreements of the lawsuit settlement.

Recommendation 1: Placement of Posting

Recommendation 2: Reposting

Recommendation 3: 48 Hour Notices Reposted

Recommendation 4: Inclement Weather Sweeps Hault

Recommendation 5: Camping Ban, Notice Right

Recommendation 6: Police Tape/Fencing Removed

Recommendation 7: Disposal of Needles and Hazardous waste

Recommendation 8: Storage awareness

Recommendation 9: Storage hours

Recommendation 10: Storage number

Recommendation 11: Language used (clean-up vs sweep)

Recommendation 12: Cleaning without Being Displaced

Recommendation 13: Sanitation Resources

Recommendation 14: Transparency for DOTI Sweeps Procedures

Recommendation 15: Somewhere to be

Recommendation 16: Housing for all

Recommendation 1: Placement of Posting

Only 29.3% of respondents reported seeing notice of the sweep posted before it occurred. Survey respondents most suggested the following: Attached to each Tent/Structure (66%), Attached to Fences (49.6%), Attached to Posts (40.4%), Handed directly to people staying there (41.8%). Based on suggested placement from survey respondents **at least some of these additional placement locations should be used. In addition, notification to Plaintiffs (DHOL) is crucial.**

Recommendation 2: Reposting

Many times the city did not come for a sweep on the noted day and then came later without reposting a new date. This leaves street residents confused with no way of knowing when the sweep will happen and whether to trust the dates noted. 46.2% respondents said they did not find they could trust the city to come on the day their camp was posted for a sweep.

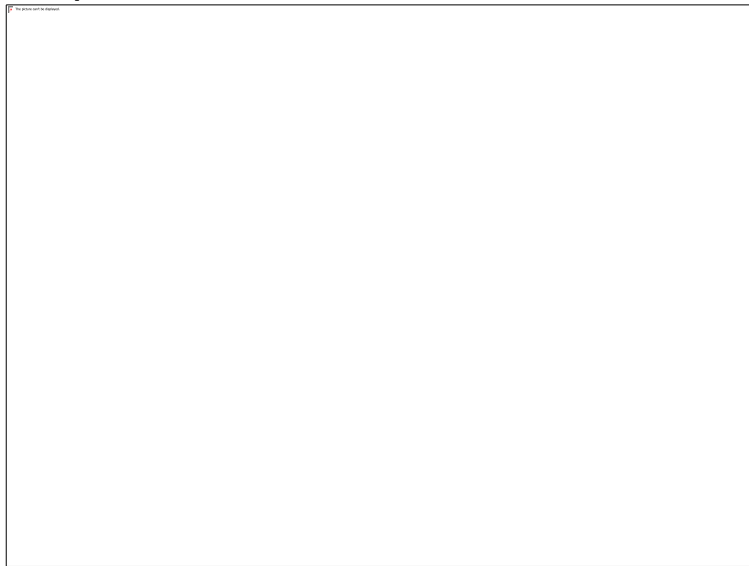
81.5% of respondents thought that if the city did not come on the posted day and still intended to come, the notice of a sweep should be reposted. It is critical that **in cases where the city does not do a sweep on the day designated by the posted notice, if the city plans to still do the sweep they should re-post a notice for another 7 days with a new date.**

Recommendation 3: 48 Hour Notices should be 7 Day

Delaying a sweep is usually a good thing, but **if it is delayed from the 48 hour mark and still planned, it should be reposted.** Additionally, when a camp grows from small to large due to people coming from other sweeps if some of the tents have already been posted with 48 hour notices and others have not, there is mass confusion on who is at risk and not. Residents of these camps do not know what to expect and thus do not trust the process. **7 Day Notice should be given as a default in all situations.** This is in keeping with the ruling in the federal injunction which requires 7 day notices in all cases except emergencies.

Recommendation 4: Halt Inclement Weather Sweeps

The city has a policy for inclement weather where overflow shelters are opened. **This same benchmark for inclement weather should instigate a policy that temporarily halts sweeps in inclement weather.** If it's cold enough to open overflow shelter space, it's cold enough to temporarily halt sweeps.



Recommendation 5: Camping Ban, Notice Right

The injunction ruling makes it very clear that no sweep should ever happen with less than 48 hour notice and most should have 7 days. Any time DOTI or DDPHE remove property from an encampment they must have posted notice first. However, the city is trying to get around this ruling on a technicality of law by referring to the camping ban and telling people to move right away with no notice. Just because another law is used where the person is under threat of arrest and not the property, does not change the effect of this on people living on the streets. **People's right to notice must be respected regardless of the law referred to for the same purpose of moving people.**

Recommendation 6: Police Tape/Fencing Removed

Camp residents have expressed feeling trapped and unsafe with the fencing. Furthermore, the use of fencing prohibits the cooperation between mutual aid groups who seek to support unhoused residents and to build bridges between unhoused residents and the city. **Neither police tape or fencing should be used at sweeps.**



Recommendation 7: Disposal of Needles and Hazardous waste

DOTI workers admitted in court that they will trash all of someone's property if they find even one needle or one half eaten sandwich in the tent. **This practice should be changed so as to dispose of seen needles or other hazardous materials and then leave the tent in place or, if truly abandoned, store the tent just like any other tent.**



Recommendation 8: Storage awareness

In order to help spread awareness of folks on the street about the storage facility, we have recommended **the city should ensure day shelters and libraries have information posted about where to retrieve any property taken by the city.** Furthermore, the City said “if feasible” they would create a website with an accessible database of locations property was taken from and where it was stored so that people who believe their property might have been taken in a sweep can look it up before having to unnecessarily go to the storage to seek their property. This is clearly feasible as they should already be tracking this info. The **tracking website should be created.**

Recommendation 9: Storage hours

Longer and more day time hours should be implemented at the storage building.

One way to achieve these longer hours without depending on extending contractor work hours would be to **move this storage into the existing locker facility** created through the lawsuit so that property taken and stored from sweeps is at the same location as the self-storage lockers. Staff attending the lockers could also attend the property storage from sweeps.

Recommendation 10: Storage number

The notices placed at sweeps say to “call 311 to inquire and/or make arrangements to retrieve property.” However when you call 311 they do not have any information about your property. Of those respondents who had called 311, only 28.6% reported that the 311 person was able to answer their questions. **A direct line number should be given for the storage facility as staff at 311 cannot answer questions people have about their property.**

Recommendation 11: Language used (clean-up vs sweep)

Survey respondents over all report being confused on what to expect from a sweep based on language used in the posting and from officers. The language used matters. **Both the language in the notices and the language officers use when talking with encampment residents should be clear that these actions are sweeps where property is taken, not clean ups where the City is only taking trash.**

Recommendation 12: Cleaning without Being Displaced

70.4% of respondents reported that they eventually returned to the location from which they had been previously swept. It does not take rocket science to see that sweeps are not working to “connect people to services” much less get people into housing.

With the Camping Ban in effect police can always turn to this law to justify forcing people to move after a sweep. However, **City notice for the sweeps explicitly says, “this is not enforcement of the camping ban.” If these sweeps are not Camping Ban enforcement, then what law is being used to prevent people from returning to the area when it is swept?**

On the day of a “clean up,” Public Works should only be removing trash, health hazards, and large items residents ask to be removed. **People or their property should not be displaced as it should be a cleaning not a sweep.**

Recommendation 13: Sanitation Resources

In keeping with the City's stated intent of a sweep to clean an area and remedy any health or safety concerns, seeking lasting solutions to the sanitation needs of people in an area should always be the first step. **Actions taken to seek health and safety should include sanitation resources and regular trash pick up.**



Recommendation 14: Transparency for DOTI Sweeps Procedures

It has come to our attention that the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure (DOTI), the lead city agency for sweeps, keeps a calendar 6 weeks out of planned sweeps. It has also come to our attention that DOTI has a ranking system to rank encampments to sweep.

DOTI should publish their procedures and sweeps calendar transparently for the public.

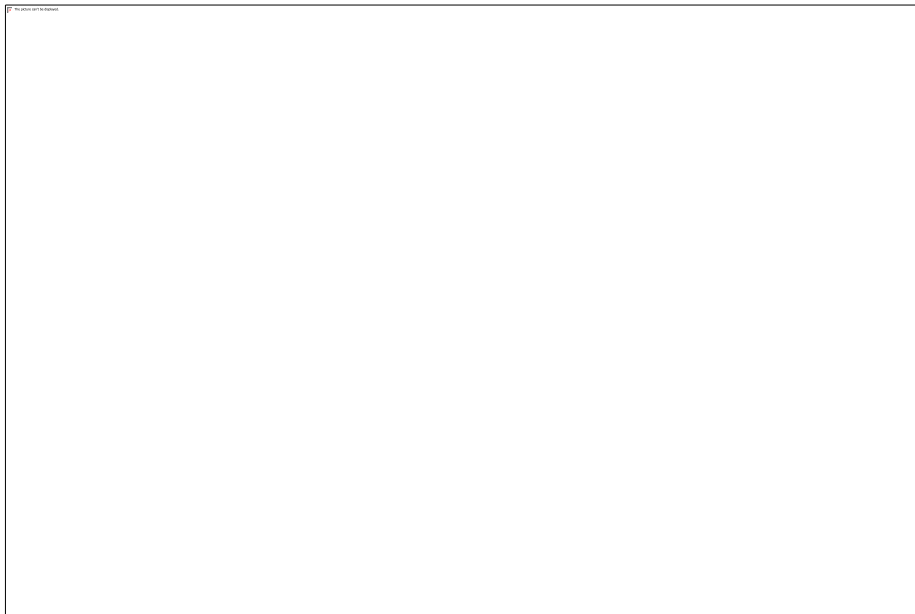
Recommendation 15: Somewhere to be

When respondents were asked how the City should change their policies, 83.6% of them requested that the City should de-emphasize sweeps altogether and focus on finding better housing options/designated sites for homeless individuals. Many respondents commented that they just wanted to know where they could be. This survey clearly shows that people staying at encampments or otherwise on the streets are desperate to know where they can be without being swept or treated as criminals. **We need leadership from the City as to where the houseless community currently living on the streets can go while the CITY creates housing.**

Recommendation 16: Housing for all

When un-housed individuals were asked what their living preference would be out of the options house, tent, or shelter, the large majority of respondents indicated that living in a **house was their first choice**, a tent was their second choice, and shelter was the third choice. Our city must approach encampments with this in mind.

Homelessness ends with a home.



Conclusion

Any policies are best directed by those directly affected. The City should use these survey findings to direct how they approach homeless encampments and should redirect practices toward health equity and attainable housing instead of sweeps which do not work.

It's time to learn from those living on our streets...Hear this voice from these 150 unhoused Denver residents...

“Act like they’re worth it” - City of Denver

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