

Statement of

Mike Johnston
Mayor, City and County of Denver

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Chairman Comer, Ranking Member Connolly, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the critical topic of immigration and how Denver responded to the unprecedented challenges created by the influx of immigrants into our community over the past few years.

When I was sworn into office 20 months ago, buses with immigrants were arriving in Denver with little-to-no notice or coordination. At the peak of the crisis, we saw ten-to-eleven buses per day, dropping off as many as 300 people, mostly women and children, on the streets of Denver in 10-degree weather with only sandals and a t-shirt, leaving them in danger of freezing to death. All told, 42,000 people arrived over 18 months—the largest per capita influx of any city in America. Denver faced the fundamental question: what our community would do with a mom and two kids dropped on the streets of our city with no warm clothes, no food, and no place to stay, while maintaining public safety in the city. This was not a question of immigration reform; it was a question of what was the best course forward for the people of Denver and their safety and security. It was also a question of right versus wrong.

Denverites believe that our problems are solvable, and we are the ones to solve them. So we took action, leaning into our values and developing a strategy to maintain public safety and the services that our residents expect and deserve, while also treating every individual in our community with compassion. We stood up multiple programs to expand housing and support for arrivals and to assist them with legal pathways to work so they could be in a position to support themselves and the community. As a result of these efforts, Denver is in a much different posture today than it was even a year ago. In the last several months, we have been able to wind down much of our short-term housing and other programs, including closing our last immigrant-dedicated shelter.

We were able to make progress at the same time that we prioritized public safety for every member of our community. To be clear, my first job as Mayor is to keep Denver safe. We cannot fulfill our ambition of being the best city in America if we cannot keep our community safe. Safe cities lead to stronger communities, better quality of life, and robust economic opportunity. That is why my administration has worked to make our streets safer by investing in our law enforcement officers on the frontlines, targeting high-risk areas, and engaging with the community. We have—and will always—pursue anyone suspected of perpetrating a crime, regardless of who they are or where they are from.

Our work on improving public safety is not complete, but I am proud of our progress: in 2024, crime decreased across our city and the number of homicides dropped by 17%. We will continue our programs and initiatives to ensure every member of our community feels safe, including continuing our long-time existing partnerships and cooperation with other local, state, and federal law enforcement organizations, including U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

As the Mayor of Denver, I could not be prouder of how the members of our community—groups of moms, our local law enforcement, nonprofits and faith organizations, and so many more—rose to the challenge presented by the influx of immigrants. Together, we developed a response that has emerged as a model for how cities can manage the crisis in real time while prioritizing public safety for the whole community, which includes cooperating with federal law enforcement on shared priorities like getting violent criminals off our streets.

Managing the Immigration Crisis in Denver

The peak of immigrant arrivals was overwhelming to our resources, and heartbreaking for our community, as residents would witness individuals, families, and even children shivering on the corner in the middle of winter. We had to respond immediately. We were not going to leave kids on the side of the road. It was a moment to step up and act. And we did.

Denver did not create the problem, but we developed solutions. Even before we reached the peak of immigrant arrivals, city officials worked with nonprofits, faith organizations, and community partners to develop a strategy for humanitarian aid. In December 2022, my predecessor issued an emergency declaration, activated our Emergency Operations Center, and converted three recreation centers to aid with new arrivals. And, as the crisis unfolded under my tenure, we implemented a thoughtful, pragmatic plan that prioritized protecting our community and maintaining public safety while staying true to our shared values.

First, we worked to provide temporary housing to new arrivals, rather than leaving them on the side of the road. This was essential to promoting public safety and responding to the emergency. We expanded available shelter support, repurposed existing city facilities, and leased hotels that were experiencing high vacancy rates.

Second, we took action to enable eligible immigrants to support themselves with jobs. During the crisis, I would have the same two conversations all day: a business owner would call me and say Mike, I have open jobs and need people. I would also talk to the immigrants themselves who would say: I don't want any help. All I want is a job. Many of the arrivals in our city were eligible for work because they either qualified for Temporary Protected Status, entered the country lawfully through a port of entry, or had applied for asylum and had concluded the designated waiting period to work in this country. That is why we helped support eligible immigrants pursue work authorization, including launching the Denver Asylum Seekers Program for those who were seeking asylum but had not yet exhausted the waiting period to seek work authorization. The investment in work authorization support was a direct investment in our

community; it allowed us to minimize budget cuts and provide essential public services while filling critical labor shortages.

Our pivot from providing a short-term emergency response to focusing on job training was an important part in our community's management of the crisis. All told, the state and the city helped more than 8,700 people pursue work authorization. We have been able to wind down much of our short-term housing and other programs for immigrants. As a result of our collective efforts to take on this challenge, our 2025 general fund budget reduced expenses related to immigrant resources by nearly 90%.

Prioritizing Public Safety in Denver

There is no tradeoff between welcoming immigrants and maintaining public safety for all members of the Denver community. We take seriously the safety of all who call Denver home. One of the ways in which Denver law enforcement fights crime is by partnering with other local, state, and federal law enforcement organizations. Denver Police is the lead agency or member of a number of joint task forces, where different law enforcement agencies coordinate and share information to tackle crime, including narcotics trafficking, human trafficking, and other violent crimes. For example, we are part of the Regional Anti-Violence Enforcement Network (R.A.V.E.N.) anti-gang task force and Rocky Mountain High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area, which have been instrumental in prosecuting MS-13 gang members in the metropolitan area and successfully reducing fentanyl overdose deaths in our city by more than 30% this past year. Another part of our crime reduction strategy is our Hot Streets patrol initiative. By increasing the police presence in high-risk areas, this initiative has prevented crime before it occurs, leading to a significant reduction in violence in those neighborhoods.

Our city and local law enforcement's efforts have meant that crime in Denver is on the decline. From 2023 to 2024, auto thefts declined by 29%; homicides declined by 17%; the number of shooting victims declined 24%; and property crimes declined by 17%. I am encouraged by these trends, but there is more we must do.

Statistics are crucial indicators, but making sure people feel safe is paramount. That is why we have allocated \$11.9 million this year to add up to 24 firefighters, 60 sheriff's deputies, and 168 police recruits, which would mean more first responders on our streets. Those officers, as part of their regular shift, will continue to spend dedicated time doing trust patrols to build relationships with all our community members because we know communities where police build and earn trust are safer places.

Cooperating with Federal Law Enforcement on Immigration

Our work with federal law enforcement on shared priorities to keep our communities safe is in everyone's best interests—the people of Denver and across the country. Our priority has been—

and will continue to be—keeping violent criminals off our streets regardless of their background, and we have long collaborated with ICE on this effort.

Under my leadership, Denver will continue to follow the law at all levels—local, state, and federal. In January, I outlined a plan to work with the new administration that balances Denver’s commitment to public safety and cooperation with ICE with our values as a welcoming city.

First, we will continue to cooperate with ICE on violent criminals. Our laws allow city employees to cooperate with federal immigration enforcement authorities in the execution of a warrant issued by a federal judge or magistrate. Federal immigration authorities with such a warrant can access the secure areas of any city or county jail or other city-owned law enforcement facility for the purpose of enforcing federal immigration laws. In addition, when the Denver Sheriff’s Department receives a request from ICE asking us to notify them when we release someone in our custody, that is what we do. This allows ICE to know when and where an individual is being released so that if that person is a priority for federal law enforcement, they are able to take that individual into custody.

Second, we believe in partnership—if there is a dangerous situation that threatens public safety, we will work with federal and other municipalities’ law enforcement agencies.

Third, we will support immigrants who are playing by the rules, including asylum applicants. People should feel safe worshipping their God, going to the hospital, or picking their kids up from school, and, if necessary, we will pursue legal challenges to protect our community members in these sensitive locations.

And *fourth*, we have a social services strategy in place in the event that the federal government separates children from their families.

There is no place for violent criminals in Denver or in our country. Federal, state, and local authorities are responsible for different aspects of the problem, but there are ways we can and must work together on this issue.

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Cities are on the frontlines of dealing with the consequences of a broken immigration system. People view Denver’s approach to the influx of immigrants as a model, and I am proud of the work we have done in that regard. But, this is not a substitute for necessary bipartisan, comprehensive immigration reform at the federal level.

We would not be the country we are today without being a welcoming place for immigrants. They enrich our communities and support our economy. Nearly half of Fortune 500 companies were founded by immigrants or their children. That is foundational to the American story, which is why I am interested in figuring out solutions to the challenges our cities and country face. Dreamers who are contributing to our communities deserve a path to citizenship. Mixed status families who are worried about who may be taken and who will stay deserve clarity. Asylum seekers fleeing persecution should not have to wait seven years to have their cases fully heard.

And, we should secure our southern border by relying on effective solutions. I welcome a conversation with any Member of this Committee about proposals for comprehensive federal immigration reform that secures our border, creates a better process for immigrants to come to the United States, and makes the immigration situation easier for cities to manage.

America is not just a place, it is a belief; some people are born into it, some fight their whole life to get to it, but if you love this country and contribute to this country, there should be a place here for you. There is still a path for the United States to be a welcoming place for those seeking a better life while we simultaneously secure our borders and keep our communities safe. We should aggressively prosecute and deport those who commit violent crimes. For those who want to work and play by the rules, we should put them to work. The United States is the envy of every country in the world, letting kids wake up in foreign lands with the dream that someday if they work hard enough, they might have the privilege of getting to be a part of it, too.

Thank you for the opportunity to address Denver's response to the influx of immigrants in our community. I hope the lessons that we have learned and the solutions that we have developed will help this Congress come together and address our broken immigration system. I look forward to your comments and questions.