



Feedback

# er population faces

barriers to housing, added violence



by **Alison Berg** • Published on August 30, 2023



Feedback

**Ana Miller, a transgender woman and advocate for the unhoused community, stands outside.**

*Peter Vo, Rocky Mountain PBS*

ROCKY MOUNTAIN PBS

DENVER — Ana Miller wonders when she can stop living in fear.

As a transgender woman who is often between housing and homelessness, each morning feels like it begins with a deep inhale. The time she gets to exhale depends on several factors: Whether she’s harassed by police or other unhoused folks, has enough money to eat and if she can rely on Denver’s public transit to get to work on time.

She hopes for the day when each breath feels steady and smooth.

“It is not safe to be transgender and homeless,” Miller said during an interview at Denver’s Mutiny

Information Cafe, one of a dwindling number of safe spaces she knows she can visit without

SHE KNOWS SHE CAN VISIT WITHOUT  
e, you already have to deal with so  
t gets really bad.”

Miller is 41 years old. Most of her life has involved bouncing around shelters, encampments, hotels and friends' couches. Though she recently came out as transgender, Miller has faced discrimination all her life for being queer and unhoused.

“I was being shoved into lockers in high school, being called names every day just because I was different,” Miller said.

Born in Boulder, Miller's family moved to rural Georgia when she was a kid. Her mom died of alcohol-related liver failure when Miller was 20.

“That was just it. My whole brain shut down. I lost everything,” Miller said.

Her mother's death threw Miller into a spiral. She became addicted to alcohol and heroin, and she used many other drugs. In 2012, her then-girlfriend, who she said was “the greatest love I've ever had,” died of a heroin overdose.

Miller knew she needed to leave Georgia. Her overdose could be next.

She bought train tickets taking her between Atlanta and Denver, sleeping on the street when necessary and scraping together money for shared motel rooms when she could afford the luxury.

In 2019, she made Denver her permanent residence.

“At least in Colorado, I had services,” Miller said. “I could be on the streets, but I could survive.”

Presenting as a man at the time, Miller mostly stayed on the streets but opted for men's shelters when temperatures made living outside dangerous. However, shelters presented their own danger for someone who didn't fit the masculinity mold.

“The absolute fear of being in the shelters with violence and stuff is horrific,” Miller said. “The men's shelters aren't safe for anyone, but especially men who are different in some way.”

Most of Denver's shelters are operated by churches, which Miller believed contributed to discrimination she felt while in the shelter system.

“I don't get why our shelters are run by religious organizations in the first place,” Miller said. “I just wish they were more understanding of trans people and our needs.”

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## Data and discrimination

Hana Fageeh, a graduate student at the University of Colorado Denver, published a capstone research project Aug. 15 identifying barriers transgender people face in obtaining housing, as well as the higher levels of violence they face while experiencing homelessness.

Fageeh's research found that transgender and nonbinary people who sought homeless shelters and worked with case managers faced discrimination in both areas.

"Sheltering and case management, which are supposed to be the biggest things that help people, were actually the biggest barriers," Fageeh said.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness also found that while only 5 percent of the general population identifies as transgender or non-binary, they make up an estimated 20 to 40 percent of the unhoused population. Similarly, the National Center for Transgender Equality found that around [30 percent of transgender people have experienced homelessness at some point in their lives](#).

"Trans and non-binary people are discriminated against nationwide, with housing and also all systemic barriers as well," Fageeh said. "There's just a lack of equitable treatment in our society whether it's on an individual level or a systemic level."



But on Aug. 25, the Denver Housing Authority [snut down the only non-congregate shelter](#) (meaning residents have their own room) that exclusively serves women, transgender and non-binary people in Denver. That shelter, located in the Rodeway Inn Motel in northwest Denver, was operated by The Gathering Place and The Salvation Army. The 76 residents weren't given clear answers about their next steps.

The Delores Project — Denver's other option exclusively for women, transgender and non-binary people — only houses 50 guests. The shelter has 46 full beds, with its remaining four reserved for those returning from Denver County Jail and the Colorado Department of Corrections.

“For women and trans folks living on the streets, things can be really dangerous, they can experience a lot of violence, and so coming here can just take a minute to come down from that,” said Allison Blakeny, assistant shelter manager at The Delores Project. “The stakes for trans and non-binary people who are experiencing homelessness are much higher. The violence is much higher.”

Being openly transgender on the streets and in most shelters can prove not only isolating but dangerous, Miller said. She feared for her physical safety when she started to present more femininely.

“There's a fear of being beaten on the streets by someone you thought you could trust,” Miller said. “Coming out on the streets would be terrifying because I had friends who, as soon as they found out, would not speak to me.”

Shelters that specifically serve transgender people are vital, Blakeny said, because of the violence so many face in other settings.

“Transgender people have higher rates of mental health issues and substance usage because of the systems and the world that show them that they don't belong, because of families, because of cultures,” Blakeny said. “That translates to even more violence and lack of safety.”

Meladie Fisher, a transgender woman who served 17 years in Colorado State Prison and was released in July, said staying at The Delores Project has helped her recover from years of prison-induced trauma. Though she was on hormone-replacement therapy for most of her time in the prison and presented as a woman, the Colorado Department of Corrections kept her in the men's facility, where she said she faced brutal physical and sexual violence.

“If you're a trans woman, you should never be put in a man's facility, period, especially when you're as feminine as I am,” Fisher said. “It just makes us an immediate target.”

...women's prison, but the process is so  
...it was worth.

"It was just one hurdle after another, one setback after another," Fisher said. "It was aggravating. It made me angry, I felt there was just absolutely no way it was going to be fixed."

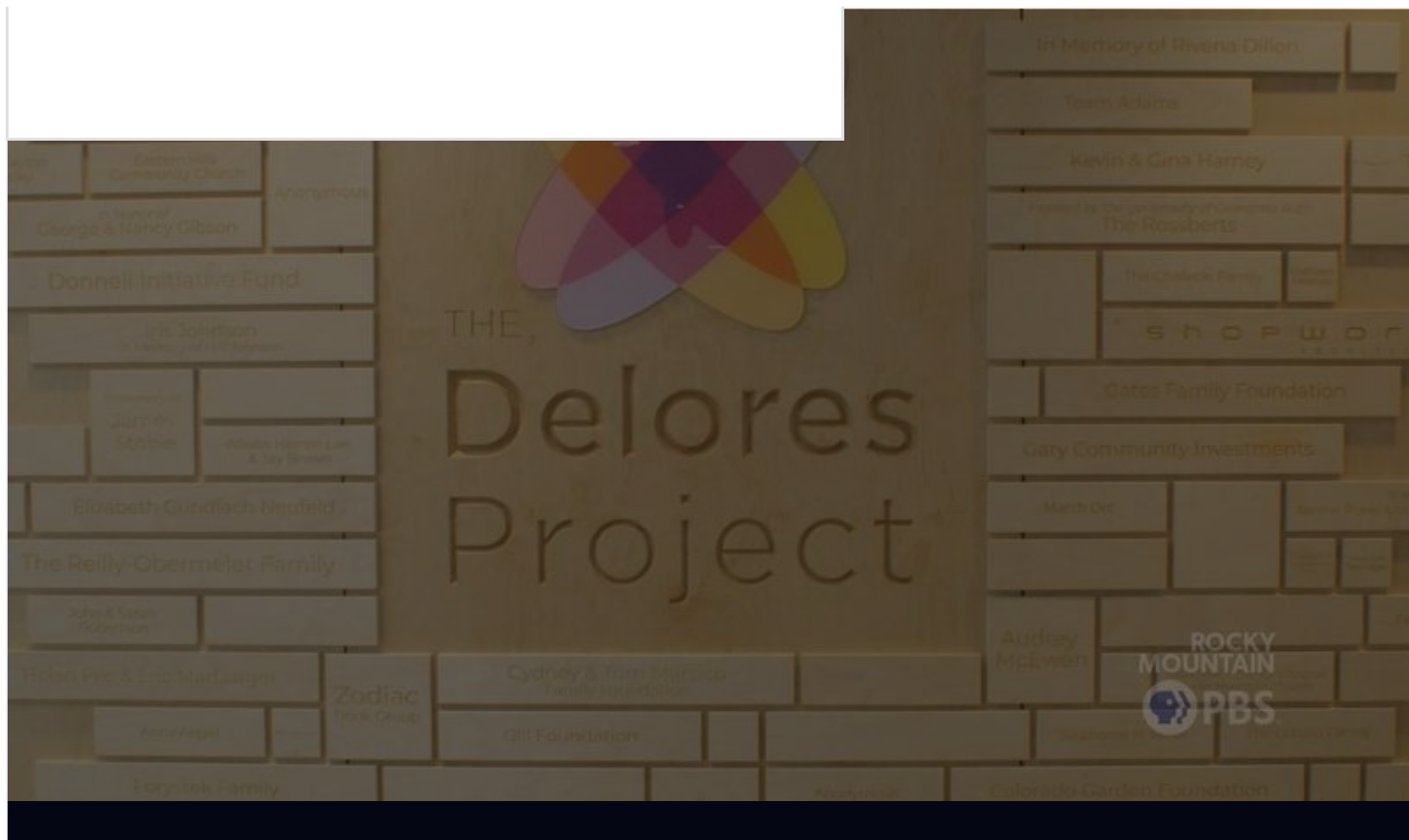
After slightly more than a month in The Delores Project's shelter, Fisher said she has found community with other transgender women and experienced happiness she never thought possible.

"It's so comforting, because a lot of the stress that you'd have trying to get daily needs and things like doctors and all that, they help with all of that," Fisher said. "And I don't have to worry about being attacked."

Fisher calls her friends in the shelter "my sisters.". In her 55 years of life, Fisher said she constantly felt alienated among men and misunderstood among cisgender women. But she now has what feels like family.

"I've got maybe four or five that I call sisters that are really close to me, know everything about me, we're in contact every day," Fisher said. "I never had much of a family growing up, most of my family has issues with alcohol and drugs and the family that wasn't like that didn't want much to do with me, so the girls here are my family."

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COLORADO VOICES

## Housing at The Delores Project

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### Hate and instability

Riley is still learning what stability feels like.

A transgender woman, Riley grew up in New Orleans and experienced a toxic home life. She moved to Denver to live with a family member, but that quickly turned into an unsafe situation, leaving her with unstable housing.

“I’ve never really had stable housing my whole life,” Riley said.

She has worked in education and the service industry, both of which did not provide enough money to afford long-term, safe housing. She bounced around apartments across the Denver area and has dealt with transphobic neighbors throughout her housing journey.

“When I started to dress more feminine and be more myself outside of my apartment, I started getting harassed a lot more,” Riley said. “Someone put a bag of trash in front of my apartment just because they were hateful.”

aid she finally feels safe in her home, a

“It’s just a very special thing when you’re allowed to be who you feel you are and who you want to be,” Reso said.

Sabrina Reed, a cisgender lesbian who lives in a permanent supportive housing complex run by a homelessness services organization in Colorado Springs, said her experiences have been mixed, but many on the streets and in shelters have harassed her for her sexuality.

“When I started coming here, people would give me dirty looks and call me names,” Reed said. “I like to express who I am. If I want to look gay, I should look gay.”

When Reed and her girlfriend would show public affection, Reed said the two were often called “disgusting.”

“I would say ‘if it’s so disgusting, why don’t you talk to the front desk about it,’” Reed responded.

But over time, most came around and supported her. She’s a Christian, which she said helped her find common ground with others in Colorado Springs.

“The person who once called me disgusting gave me a high-five when I told them about my new girlfriend,” Reed said. “The nice thing about the homeless community is most of them come around once they understand better.”

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*Sabrina Reed, who lives in a housing complex run by Springs Rescue Mission, feeds her cat, Medna.  
(Alison Berg/Rocky Mountain PBS)*

## Between the binary

Most of Denver's homeless shelters are separated by gender. Those who run the shelters said the reason for doing so is to keep their residents safe.

"Because women do experience a lot of violence and men perpetrate a lot of violence, that is very necessary," Blakeny said.

But the rigidity of gendered shelters makes finding options nearly impossible for non-binary people, who do not identify as either a man or woman. The system also creates safety concerns for transgender people who do not "pass" as their gender.

Rocky Mountain PBS called every overnight homeless shelter [listed on the city and county of Denver's website](#) to ask about their policies on serving transgender and non-binary people. Those

g those who are transgender. They also  
er clients feel safe in shelter.

“We have policies and procedures in place to make sure guests are as safe as possible, especially those identifying in the transgender community,” said Stephen Hinkel, public relations director at Denver Rescue Mission, an overnight shelter that exclusively serves men. “We do provide accommodations like single-use bathrooms if guests feel they might be in danger of identifying as transgender.”

Though Denver Rescue Mission's shelter is only accessible to men, their meal services are accessible to people of all genders. Hinkel said the shelter served nearly one million meals in 2022, with just 41 going to transgender people.

While shelters cannot legally turn transgender people away and must provide safety measures, those experiencing homelessness painted a different picture of staying in gendered shelters.

“The amount of violence I've seen just to men who present male or are queer in any way are through the roof, and the staff either don't care or don't know what to do,” Miller said. “There's very few places you're not going to be harassed and it's because of the underlying tolerance of the harassment that these religious organizations let go on.”

And for those who present as one gender but feel differently, living in a gendered shelter can bring feelings of sadness, confusion and dysphoria.

“It would only be up to a certain point that I'd be able to conceal my identity and the people that are in those shelters are not safe,” said Attom Jay Safford, a non-binary person who lives in The Delores Project shelter. “I could be beaten or raped or worse.”

Safford has been on testosterone for nearly two years. They have wispy strawberry-blond facial hair that covers a squared jaw. To most, they look like a man, but being included in crude conversations directed at women with other men makes them feel uncomfortable.

“I don't really identify with cisgender guys, but because I now look like one, they direct conversations to me and I don't really fit in with either side,” Safford said. “My identity is still being questioned.”

They grew up in Florida, and after leaving an abusive childhood home, sought refuge in Kansas because of its status as the cheapest state in the country. But when they moved for affordability, they didn't realize it would come at a cost of safety for being transgender and unhoused.

e are we supposed to go?” Safford  
people think you just want drugs or

Living in their car in Kansas brought crippling depression and fear, so Safford headed west to Colorado, where they heard laws would protect their transgender status and resources existed for houseless individuals. They contacted The Center on Colfax as soon as they arrived and were referred to The Delores Project, which happened to have an available bed.

“This place was literally the thing that saved my life, because I would’ve either killed myself or been homeless on the streets,” Safford said. “I was almost at that breaking point, but then I got here.”

Now that they don’t live in fight-or-flight mode, Safford finally feels like they can think about their life’s next steps. They enjoy film and art, and hope to make a career out of their passions.

“I want to leave my mark on the world, like make a difference,” Safford said. “I want to make this place better than I found it.”

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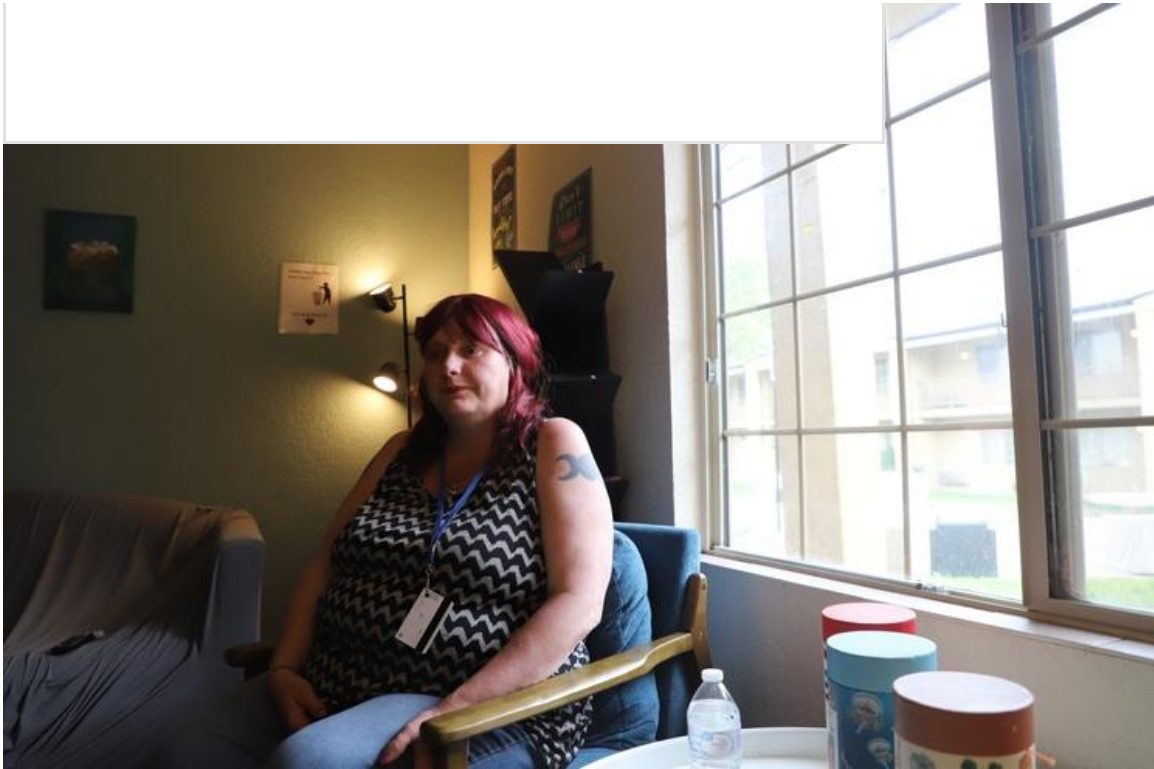
*Alison Berg is a reporter at Rocky Mountain PBS and can be reached at [alisonberg@rmpbs.org](mailto:alisonberg@rmpbs.org).*

*William Peterson is a senior photojournalist at Rocky Mountain PBS. You can reach him at [williampeterson@rmpbs.org](mailto:williampeterson@rmpbs.org).*

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