Denver announces a housing and homelessness department — kind of

No details yet, but the Hancock administration says a "proposed new department will galvanize and enhance city resources."

Cathy Albro, vice president of communications and public policy for the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless, said what she has heard about a new department "could be an absolute step in the right direction, getting our regions in line... and getting folks who work in this space to change from a path a go to a.

"We are strengthening and aligning our resources to help more people move from the streets to permanent housing, supporting, and with work dignity and compassion," Hancock said.

The Health and Human Services department said that "with the formation of a new department of housing and homelessness, and as recommended by the auditor's review, the city will undertake development of a new comprehensive strategic plan to address homelessness, which will explore new innovations and build on Denver's current partnerships. The bill will implement strategies to track the city's progress and show the human impacts of Denver's strategy and investments into the prevention of and solutions to homelessness.

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"We really want to see the city commit to a strategy with set goals," she said. She said resources would also have to be committed, which might involve asking voters to increase funding.

Albro said that is to see her organization and others that provide housing and other services to people in homelessness, little would be in the auditor's report of "observations of fragmented" collaboration with nonprofits and other partners: lack of information sharing, similar service gaps, and lack of coordinated funding for the same programs — including the absence of a dedicated data analyst with the time and expertise to help Denver's Road Home fulfill its responsibilities. Denver's Road Home is the city agency charged with coordinating services for the homeless.

Albro said she believed the audit would push the city to take a more thoughtful approach. But elements of the city's response are welcome.

In its statement responding to the audit, Health and Human Services pointed to progress, saying, for example, that the annual Point-in-Time survey of people experiencing homelessness showed a decline. But Albro said the decline has been relatively small and that it was concerning because by increasing within the numbers of people who were seriously mentally ill or experiencing homelessness.

The Metro Denver Homelessness Initiative, the nonprofit that leads the Point in Time count across the region, recently revamped its data collection systems.

Without good data, "you're responding to things that aren't accountable," said Matt Mower, who recently took over as MNHI's interactive director. He said MNHI was already working with Denver Road Home and government and nonprofit agencies across the region to improve information gathering.

"What the audit has brought up are valid concerns, but I think they're ones we're all working on," Mower said.

Albro, of the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless, also saw reason for hope, including increased attention to the issue of homelessness in Denver in general.

"We are hearing better conversations about homelessness than we've had in the past," she said.

The Health and Human Services release did not elaborate on what the proposed new housing and homelessness department might look like. Denver Mayor Michael Hancock, who has been working on Denver Economic Development & Opportunity — formerly the Office of Economic Development — was asked along with three other politicians who would they would support a separate housing department for Denver.

"We have actually been working on this for some time," Chief Housing Officeotta Fisher said, indicating an announcement would come, as Woodhouse said Thursday, during the city's annual focus on affordable housing on Fridley.

Fisher's new advisory committee reaction from Hancock's champions Hancock was not among the panelists.