

Josh Davison

Prof. Lesley Lavery

POLI 204

8 May 2021

### Denver's Swift COVID-19 Response

During the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, states and cities across the country struggled to keep city policies and guidelines consistent. Lack of guidance from the federal government left states and cities clueless on when to implement stay-at-home orders, mask mandates, or testing procedures. However, Denver is one instance where both the city of Denver and the state of Colorado closely aligned their policies, attempting to maintain the health of the largest population center in the state. As the Denver metropolitan area houses nearly half of Colorado's entire population, it was imperative for Denver to appropriately act in order to avoid becoming a center for massive community spread of the virus. Within days of each other, Denver Mayor Michael Hancock and Colorado Governor Jared Polis would release nearly identical guidelines, differing only in the scope of their jurisdiction. This close partnership led to a coherent joint effort to combat the virus. As a result, Denver stood as an example to Colorado cities who hesitated to implement stay-at-home orders, mask mandates, and other policies in the early days of the pandemic.

Governor Polis took the first steps when dealing with the coronavirus pandemic, as the first cases weren't actually in Denver. Back in March of 2020, all of Colorado's positive cases were individuals who had either traveled to foreign countries or had been traveling, and these individuals typically lived in counties far from Denver. A man from Summit County, a two-hour drive from downtown Denver, was the first person in Colorado to test positive for COVID-19. He had recently traveled to Italy before returning home and testing positive. Polis declared a state of emergency on March 10th, and further tried to curb the risk from out-of-state spring

break travelers by shutting down all ski resorts on March 15th (Paul). As statistics later proved, some of the counties with the highest number of coronavirus cases in March were counties with ski resorts, including Summit County, home to Breckenridge, a popular tourist and ski destination.

By the middle of March, Denver did not yet have a confirmed case. As the situation evolved in the middle of March and more cases popped up around the state, and finally in Denver itself, Denver began proactively announcing guidelines. A trend emerged where Polis continually supported Denver's guidance by releasing nearly identical policies just days after Mayor Hancock, leading other counties and cities in the same direction as Denver. On March 16th, Hancock announced that businesses like restaurants, bars, gyms, and theatres would be closed starting the following day. Later that same afternoon, Polis announced a similar policy for the whole state (Wingerter). On March 18th, during the spring break for some schools in Colorado, Polis officially declared all schools closed through at least mid-April. This was unnecessary for school districts like Denver Public Schools, who had already announced their closure before their spring break the week before (Birkeland). Hancock announced his stay-at-home order on March 23rd, and Polis announced his on March 25th (Bryson and Campbell).

This consistency at both the state and the local level created cohesive safety measures for Denver residents, and proved to other Colorado cities that proactive guidance would not be punished. In some sense, it would be rewarded. Undoubtedly, the fact that both Hancock and Polis are Democrats with similar ideology about their preferred methods and types of guidelines helped their policy choices align. Their policies aligned in part because Hancock took proactive

steps to protect Denver residents in ways that benefited the health of the whole state, in ways that Polis certainly agreed with.

Hancock's leadership did not always influence the whole of Denver's metropolitan area. State guidance from the governor became an invaluable asset when cities or residents outside Denver's jurisdiction started to make trouble and ignore local guidelines. The Boulder campus of the University of Colorado has been a hotspot throughout the pandemic, having multiple issues with students ignoring local guidelines. This culminated in an 800-person party in early March of 2021 in the streets of Boulder, with many party attendees refusing to disperse even when the police became involved (Borden). This incident was particularly troubling because many residents of Denver and Boulder live in one city and commute to the other for both work and recreation. Large gatherings like this one increased community spread to other urban centers like Denver, which directly risked lives. Of course, Boulder did have its own mask mandate in place at the time, additionally enforced by Polis's guidance at the state level, and this group of students was condemned by the CU Boulder Chancellor. Thankfully, Hancock did not have to overstep his jurisdiction to condemn these partygoers, because other mayors and the governor acted judiciously for the sake of all community members, not just their local residents.

Denver's guideline rollout was not completely perfect. On March 23rd, Hancock held a press conference to clarify the city's guidelines for his newly announced stay-at-home order. As part of this press conference, he said that liquor stores and recreational marijuana dispensaries would be required to close due to their lack of essential business status. Individuals rushed to buy alcohol and weed that afternoon, at a point in time when most cities across the country, including Denver, did not have any mandatory mask mandates. Hancock quickly amended his guidance for

these businesses later in the week, after a tense few days of panicked buying and local anger (Beaty).

Hancock also received national attention over Thanksgiving. After months of urging residents to stay home, and weeks of effort to discourage Denver residents from traveling for the holidays in particular, he left to visit his family in Mississippi, to widespread outrage from local news sources and social media users (Plotner). Many Denver residents were frustrated by Hancock's hypocrisy, especially because he had been strictly following his own guidelines up until this point.

Today, in May of 2021, more than a year after the state's first policies, Polis is slowly easing back health guidelines for the state while bolstering support for vaccination efforts. Counties are allowed to dial back their restrictions if they meet criteria like having less than 35 cases per 100,000 people, and if fewer than 5% of tests in the state are positive for the coronavirus. The dialing back efforts are different in nearly every county across the state because each county has different data in these respects ("Denver Metro Counties..."). Thankfully, the city and county of Denver cleanly map onto each other, creating continuity for Denver residents. The same is not true for all cities and counties in the state. I live in Westminster, a suburb in the northern portion of the Denver metropolitan area, which is part of two counties that are currently at different levels of restrictions. Though the rules are not wildly different in these counties, this issue has broader implications for people like business owners who are attempting to reopen their stores safely and have to manage conflicting local ordinances. Denver can maintain consistency in their rollback of guidelines because of this particular advantage, preventing the confusion present in neighboring municipalities.

Effective COVID-19 policies have depended on city governments partnering with states, as is true in Colorado and across the nation. Thankfully, Hancock had both the drive and ability to proactively protect his residents, as well as Governor Polis's support to implement coronavirus guidelines and keep both Denverites and Coloradans safe. Mayor Hancock has a large number of people to protect, and the strong-mayor structure of Denver's City Council allowed him to implement guidelines quickly to respond to the rapidly-changing situation in the city. Hopefully, few crises of this magnitude happen in the future, but Denver seems absolutely equipped to swiftly respond and protect not only Denver residents but also many Coloradans at the same time.

## Works Cited

- Beatty, Kevin. "Looking Back at Denver's 'Prohibition' of 2020, a Symbol of the City's COVID Moment." *Denverite*, Colorado Public Radio, 21 Mar. 2021, [denverite.com/2021/03/22/looking-back-at-denvers-prohibition-of-2020-a-symbol-of-the-citys-covid-moment/](https://denverite.com/2021/03/22/looking-back-at-denvers-prohibition-of-2020-a-symbol-of-the-citys-covid-moment/).
- Birkeland, Bente. "Polis Closes All Of Colorado's Schools Until April 17, Bans Gatherings of More Than 10 People." *Colorado Public Radio*, Colorado Public Radio, 18 Mar. 2020, [www.cpr.org/2020/03/18/polis-closes-all-of-colorados-schools-until-at-least-april-17/](http://www.cpr.org/2020/03/18/polis-closes-all-of-colorados-schools-until-at-least-april-17/).
- Borden, Alison. "Massive, Maskless Party Near CU Boulder Turns Violent, Injuring Police." *Colorado Public Radio*, Colorado Public Radio, 8 Mar. 2021, [www.cpr.org/2021/03/08/massive-maskless-party-at-cu-boulder-turns-violent-injuring-police/](http://www.cpr.org/2021/03/08/massive-maskless-party-at-cu-boulder-turns-violent-injuring-police/).
- Bryson, Donna, and Ana Campbell. "Here's What Denver's New Stay at Home Orders Mean." *Denverite*, Colorado Public Radio, 23 Mar. 2020, [denverite.com/2020/03/23/heres-what-denvers-new-stay-at-home-orders-mean/](https://denverite.com/2020/03/23/heres-what-denvers-new-stay-at-home-orders-mean/).
- "Denver Metro Counties May See Patchwork of COVID Restrictions in April." *Centennial Citizen*, Colorado Community Media, 2 Apr. 2021, [centennialcitizen.net/stories/metro-area-may-see-patchwork-of-restrictions-in-april,374871](https://centennialcitizen.net/stories/metro-area-may-see-patchwork-of-restrictions-in-april,374871).
- Paul, Jesse. "Coronavirus May Have Reached Colorado as Early as January, Weeks before the State Had the Ability to Test." *The Colorado Sun*, The Colorado Sun, 9 Apr. 2020, [coloradosun.com/2020/04/09/colorado-first-coronavirus-case-testing-january-2020/](https://coloradosun.com/2020/04/09/colorado-first-coronavirus-case-testing-january-2020/).

Plotner, Kayli. "Denver Mayor Traveled for Thanksgiving despite Pandemic and Twitter Was Not Happy about It." *The Denver Post*, The Denver Post, 25 Nov. 2020, [www.denverpost.com/2020/11/25/denver-mayor-hancock-travel-thanksgiving-covid-pandemic-twitter/](http://www.denverpost.com/2020/11/25/denver-mayor-hancock-travel-thanksgiving-covid-pandemic-twitter/).

Wingerter, Meg. "Colorado Governor Closes Bars, Restaurants, Theaters and Gyms in Fight against Coronavirus." *The Denver Post*, The Denver Post, 16 Mar. 2020, [www.denverpost.com/2020/03/16/coronavirus-colorado-bars-restaurants-dmv-closed/](http://www.denverpost.com/2020/03/16/coronavirus-colorado-bars-restaurants-dmv-closed/).