

ISSUE BRIEF:

ELEVATED DENVER'S COLLABORATORIES

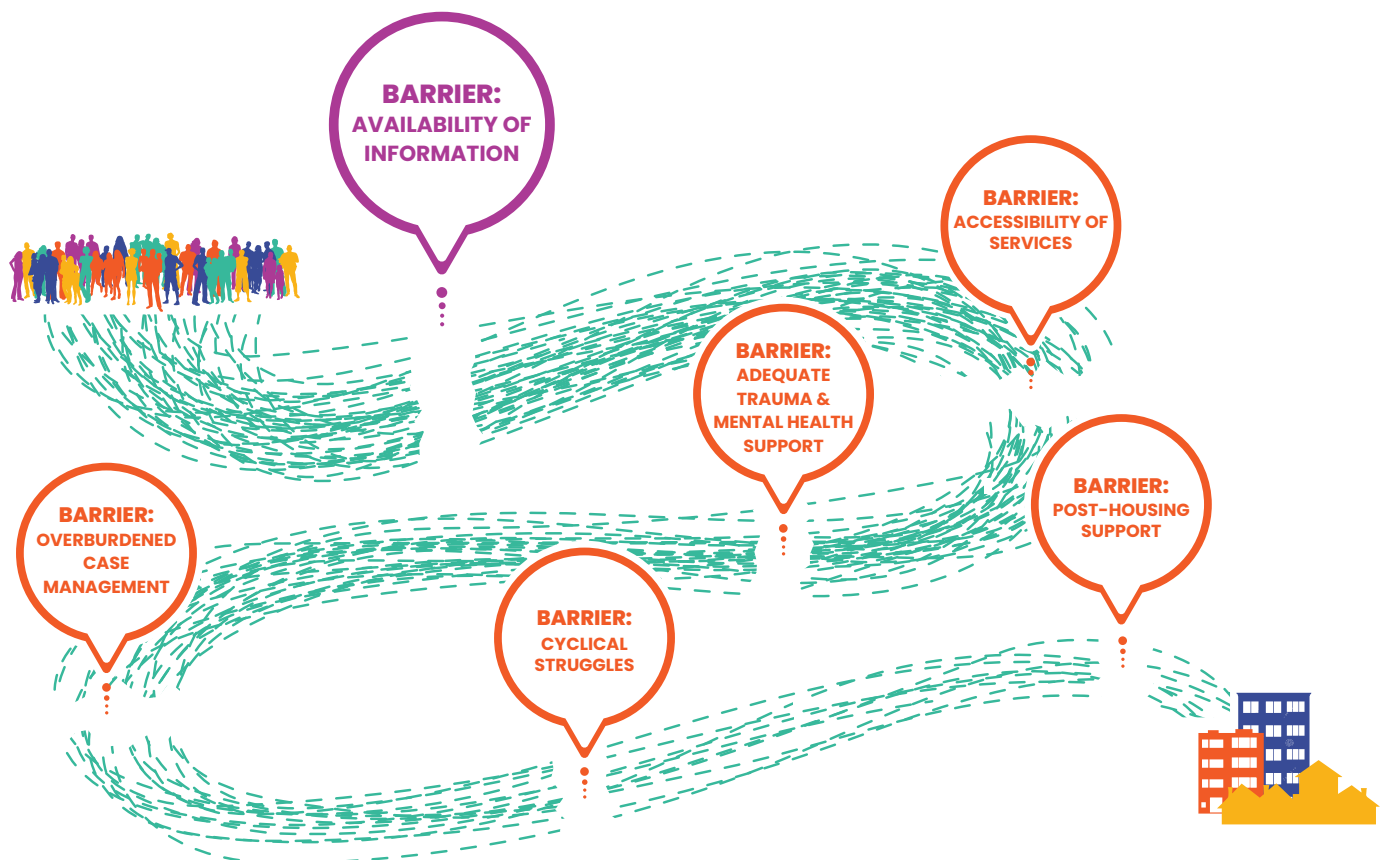
A NEW MODEL FOR DESIGNING SYSTEMIC SOLUTIONS TO HOMELESSNESS





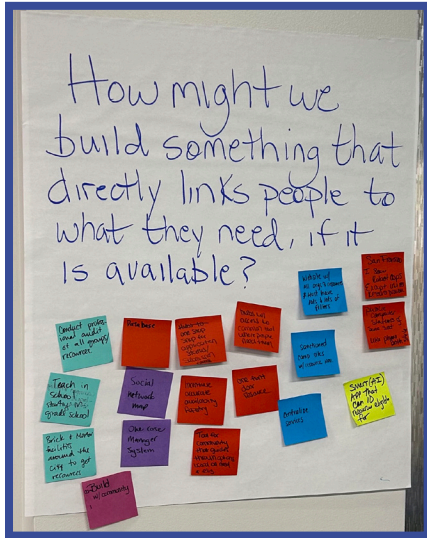
ELEVATED DENVER is tackling homelessness at the system level through our Collaboratories, shifting power to those with lived experience and co-creating sustainable, responsive solutions that address real community needs. This model unites diverse voices—lived experts, policymakers, service providers, and business leaders—to create practical, equity-driven solutions designed for scalability.

Homelessness will not be solved with a single solution. It demands a series of micro-solutions targeting critical breakdowns in our fractured housing and homelessness system, which were clearly identified in our [Community Landscape](#). Our inaugural Collaboratory, convened in the summer of 2024, focused on the first breakdown: people on the cusp of homelessness or newly unhoused often do not know where to turn for help. The fragmentation and inaccessibility of resources pushes individuals deeper into crisis, making stabilization and housing harder, costlier, and less achievable—failing them at the pivotal moments when restabilization is still within reach.



WHAT MAKES COLLABORATORIES DIFFERENT?

Collaboratories bring together small cohorts of individuals to co-design targeted, systemic solutions that can be prototyped and scaled in Denver and beyond. Foundational to the Collaboratories is:

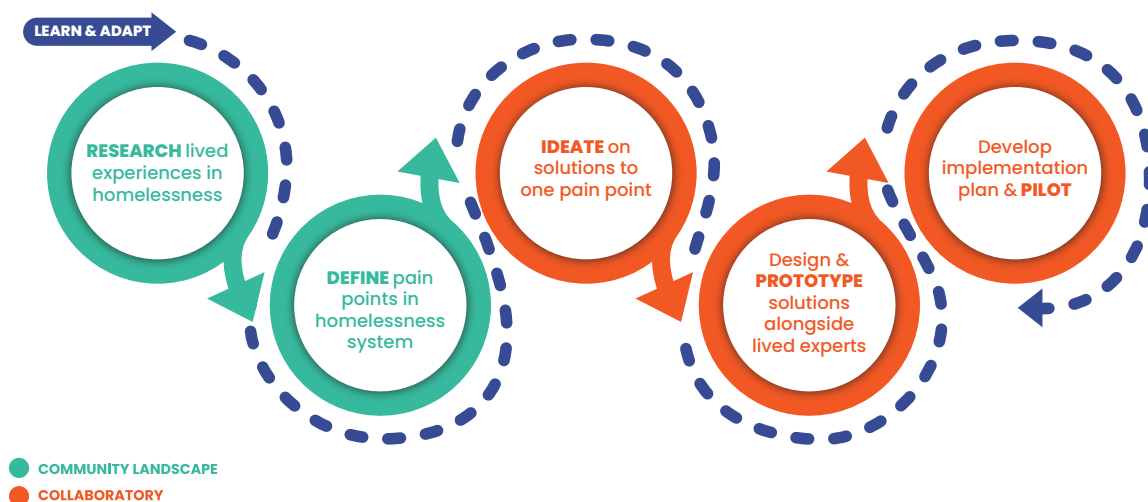


Cross-Sector Collaboration: Effective solutions require diverse perspectives. The Collaboratory unites lived experts, policymakers, service providers, and business leaders—groups that rarely share decision-making spaces. This approach ensures a holistic understanding of challenges and allows for practical, cross-sector solutions. Additionally, the model draws from efficient problem-solving practices in the private and tech sectors, applying them to complex public sector issues.

Lived Expert Leadership: Traditional systems-change efforts often fail by engaging those with lived experience only to identify problems—not to design solutions. Elevated Denver's Collaboratory shifts this dynamic by ensuring lived expertise is central to the entire process. Lived Experts co-develop the

framework, participate in every session, and provide iterative feedback to refine solutions. Their knowledge is treated not just as input, but as essential leadership, ensuring solutions are deeply informed by real-world experience.

Addressing Systemic Failures: Rather than attempting a wholesale overhaul of broken systems, the Collaboratory model targets specific barriers within them. Each issue is identified through rigorous assessment, incorporating insights from those navigating the system firsthand. Solutions are designed to be feasible, timely, and scalable, ensuring real impact. By focusing on micro-solutions—tangible changes that compound over time—the Collaboratory builds toward lasting, systemic transformation.



THE COLLABORATORY MODEL: FROM PROBLEM TO SOLUTION

Collaboratories integrate three key methodologies: Human-Centered Design, which engages those directly impacted to co-create practical solutions; Collective Impact, which aligns stakeholders across sectors toward shared goals; and Conscious Full-Spectrum Response, which ensures solutions are impactful and sustainable by addressing change at individual, organizational, and systemic levels.

There were three groups involved in the Collaboratory:



CO-DESIGNERS

The core group from government, nonprofits, business & lived experts.



CHAMPIONS

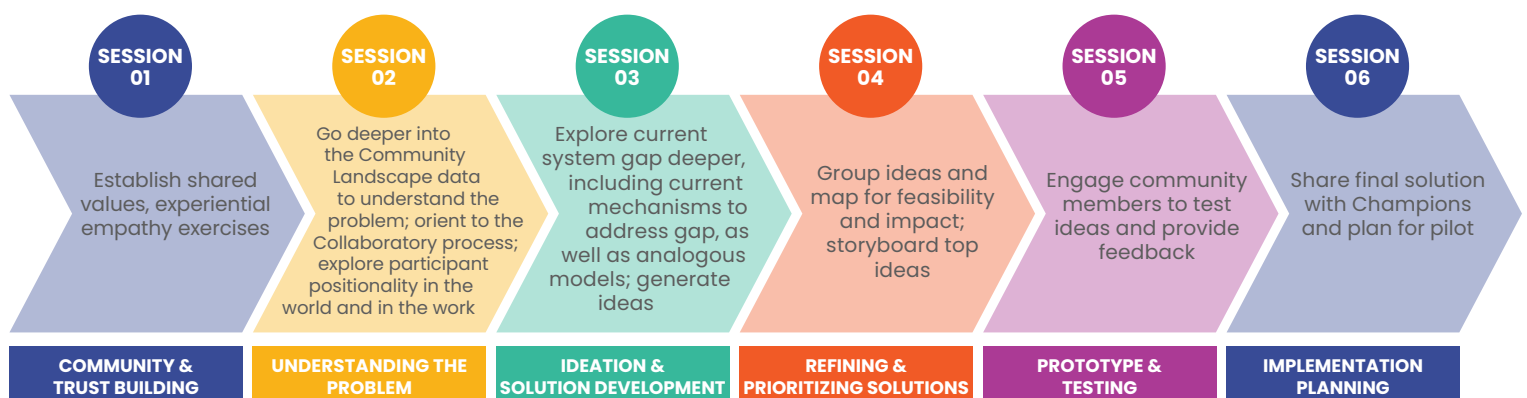
A broader group of service providers, policymakers, and leaders who refine and help implement solutions.



BACKBONE TEAM

Elevated Denver staff, expert facilitator, and evaluator guiding the process.

Over six quarter- and half-day facilitated sessions, the Collaboratory follows this structured process:



From the inaugural Collaboratory, the team developed Community Resource Connection Hubs—ensuring people in crisis receive immediate, trusted, and human-centered support. These [Hubs](#), run by trained Lived Experts, act as navigational entry points, connecting individuals to the right resources before they spiral deeper into crisis.

LESSONS LEARNED & MODEL IMPROVEMENTS



"The Collaboratory absolutely shifted my thinking about how we can solve problems here in our community. It's an extraordinary process that now I feel will work for a whole variety of other problem solving, especially big systems issues like this."

– Lindi, Nonprofit Champion



"I felt like I was actually doing real work, and we were accomplishing big things."

– Myra, Lived Expert Co-Designer



"Elevated Denver places value on uplifting the voices of marginalized peoples to challenge the status quo and create real, viable solutions to effectuate healthier communities."

– Alexis, Nonprofit Co-Designer



Elevated Denver's inaugural Collaboratory was guided by a formative evaluation, conducted by [Omni Institute](https://omniinstitute.com/), a social-science research and evaluation firm in Denver with expertise in community-based decision making. Omni observed each of the Collaboratory sessions, facilitated session debriefs among the backbone team and lived experts, and collected feedback from co-designers at the conclusion of the Collaboratory. This facilitated continuous learning and adaptation of the model, as well as flexibility in refining ideas until they became viable, impactful, and scalable. Omni documented the following learnings from the evaluation:



WHAT WORKED WELL:

In-depth user research identified system breakdowns and their root causes.

Strong relationship-building created a safe, collaborative environment.

Values-aligned Co-Designers honored the expertise and leadership of those with lived experience.

A skilled facilitator ensured power-sharing and equitable participation.

Co-Designer commitment drove engagement both in sessions and through homework.

Immersive exercise provided insight into the challenges of navigating the system.

Real-time learning and adaptation enhanced session effectiveness.

Storyboarding and solution testing with target users informed solution viability and feasibility.

Fair compensation recognized the time and expertise of Lived Experts.



CHALLENGES & REFINEMENTS:

Pre-work is needed to ensure participants arrive with foundational knowledge.

Clarifying the Collaboratory model and problem focus in the first session is essential.

Creating a comfortable environment for Lived Experts supports meaningful participation.

Co-Designers should be aligned in their willingness to share power, give and receive feedback, adapt as needed, and fully commit to the process.

Balancing trust-building with action was key to sustaining engagement and fostering collaboration among people who don't typically share power or work together.

Embedding trauma-informed practices and proactive conflict resolution strategies is crucial.

NEXT STEPS & SCALING IMPACT



"If we come together around a shared goal, understanding all of the strength that each of us brings to it, then I think we can accomplish remarkable things."

–Jeff Olivet, National Expert

Rather than seeking one-size-fits-all solutions, the focus of the first Collaboratory was developing a model that evolves with community needs, staying responsive to real-world challenges and opportunities. In the coming months, we will be integrating the key learnings into a revised Collaboratory framework for Collaboratory #2. We will continue to partner with the Collaboratory facilitator, and Omni for the evaluation.

Bringing people together across sectors and alongside those directly impacted isn't just ethical—it's essential for creating effective solutions. Elevated Denver is committed to expanding Collaboratories, refining the model, and consulting with groups nationwide to replicate this framework for user-driven solutions to systemic social challenges.

By designing just systems together, we ensure that solutions are created with and by those most impacted, leading to sustained, meaningful change.



If you are interested in learning more or participating in a future Collaboratory, reach out to Elevated Denver at info@elevateddenver.co.