



The Colorado Health Foundation™

ISSUE BRIEF:

# Housing on the Ballot

Analysis from the Colorado Local Ballot Measure Tracker, 2020-2024



SEPTEMBER 2024

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We thank Kyle Rojas Legleiter, David Proper, and Emily Mae Rader from The Colorado Health Foundation for their input. We also thank the policymakers and advocates who participated in case study interviews, including Diane Schwenke, Bernie Buescher, Randall Reitz, and others who preferred to remain anonymous.



## Introduction

**Colorado is a vibrant state known for its rich cultural heritage, diverse communities, and breathtaking natural beauty, from the majestic Rocky Mountains to its picturesque plains and thriving urban centers. It’s no wonder that so many people want to live here.**

But the state’s popularity makes it hard to stay. Colorado ranks as the eighth most unaffordable state for housing.<sup>1</sup> Coloradans’ concerns about the cost of housing have sharply risen, with 89% of respondents across the state rating it as an extremely or very serious problem in the 2024 Pulse Poll, conducted by [The Colorado Health Foundation](#). One-third of Coloradans are worried about losing their home in the next year because they cannot afford their rent or mortgage. Those living on lower incomes are more likely to worry about losing their home and renters are twice as likely as homeowners to worry about losing their home. This concern cuts across multiple demographics including race/ethnicity, household income, and region.<sup>2</sup>

Housing is a top priority of state policymakers as well, with dozens of bills introduced since 2020 related to affordable housing planning, property taxes, renters’ rights, homelessness, and construction.

In addition to recent state and federal policy action, Colorado cities, counties, and citizen petitions are asking voters to weigh in on housing issues. Ballot measures are a popular and viable pathway

for local policymakers and advocates to address housing challenges. In partnership with the [Colorado Health Institute](#) (CHI), The Colorado Health Foundation monitors city- and county-level ballot measures across the state through the [Local Ballot Measure Tracker](#).

This brief combines data from the Local Ballot Measure Tracker and two case studies of local campaigns to support policymakers and advocates as they make data-driven decisions and formulate strategies to alleviate Colorado’s housing crisis.

## Findings from the Local Ballot Measure Tracker: 2020-2024

### Key Findings

- The growth of the short-term rental market has brought a backlash from local voters.
- Local voters favor measures to fund affordable housing.
- Very few local ballot measures have directly addressed tenant rights or homelessness.



**Seven in ten** Coloradans worry about being able to afford living in Colorado in the future.

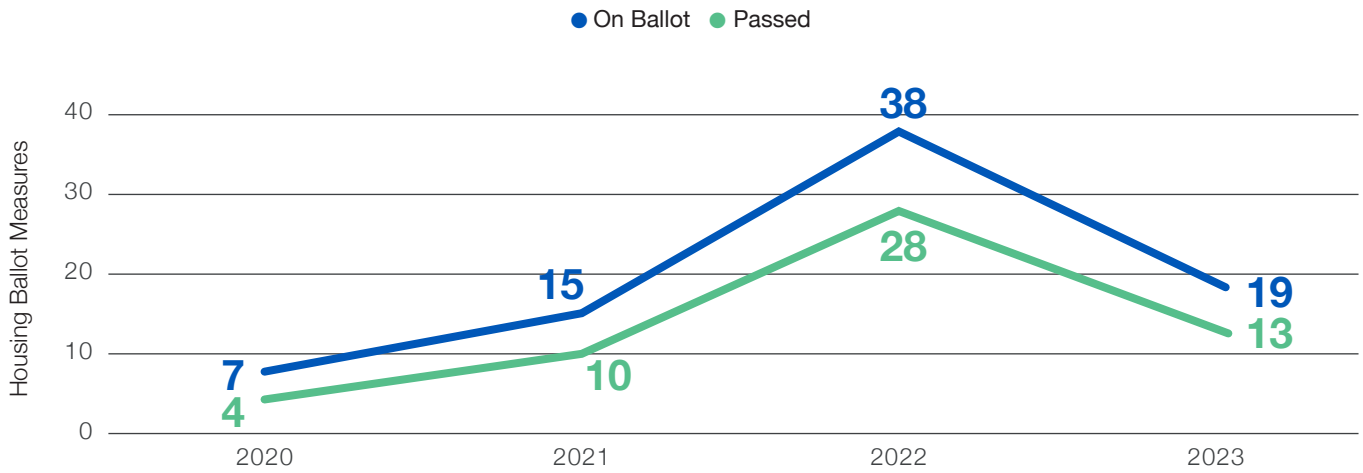


**Nine in ten** Coloradans worry about their children being able to afford living in Colorado.

## Topics

The number of certified local housing ballot measures increased over the last four years, with a dramatic spike to 38 in 2022 (Figure 1). This jump was largely driven by an increase in ballot measures that focused on short-term rental/lodging taxes and affordable housing funding (Figure 2). While most measures focused on these topics, a handful also focused on zoning and land use, tenant rights, homelessness, and construction material costs.

**FIGURE 1: SUCCESS OF LOCAL HOUSING BALLOT MEASURES OVER TIME**



**FIGURE 2: LOCAL HOUSING BALLOT MEASURES BY TOPIC OVER TIME**

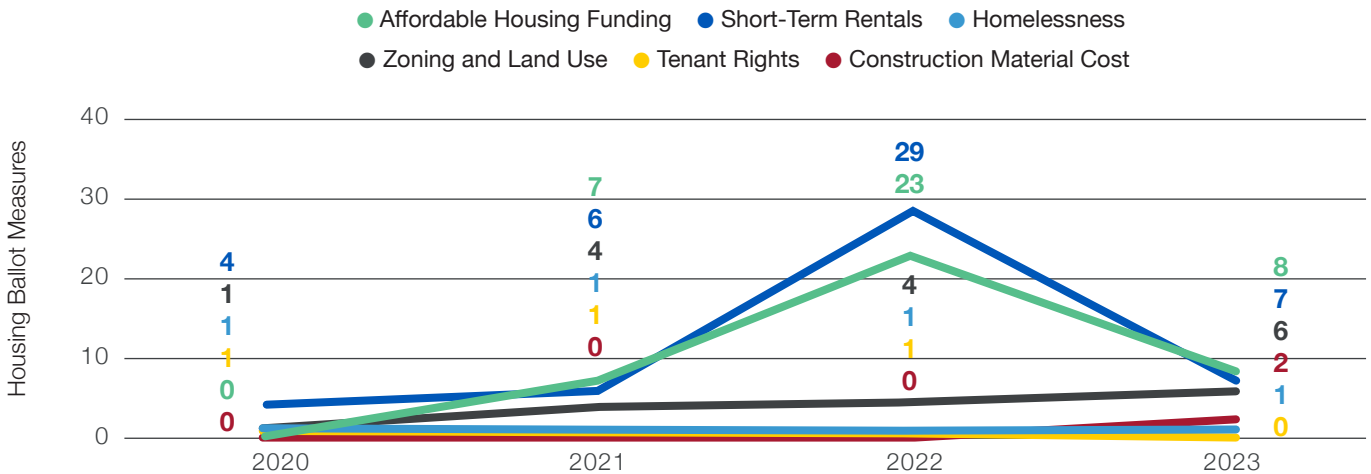
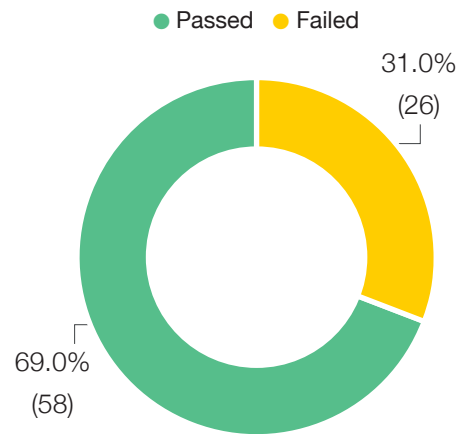


Figure Note: Ballot measure topics are not mutually exclusive. For example, a ballot measure that increases short-term rental taxes to fund affordable housing development is categorized under both the Short-Term Rentals and the Affordable Housing Funding categories.

Between the spring 2020 and spring 2024 elections, over two-thirds of local housing ballot measures passed (Figure 3). This high pass rate may reflect Coloradans' concern about affordable housing and interest in taking action to address it. Measures that fund affordable housing projects and increase short-term rental/lodging taxes, which make up most of the housing ballot measures, have passed more than three-quarters of the time in local elections.

Other housing topics rarely show up on Colorado ballots. Since 2020, all four ballot measures addressing the impacts of homelessness have passed (Figure 4). Three measures dealt with tenant rights, and only one of them passed. And two measures addressed the cost of construction materials. One passed.

**FIGURE 3: LOCAL HOUSING BALLOT MEASURES PASS RATE** (SPRING 2020 – SPRING 2024)



**FIGURE 4: LOCAL HOUSING BALLOT MEASURES PASS RATE BY TOPIC** (SPRING 2020 - SPRING 2024)

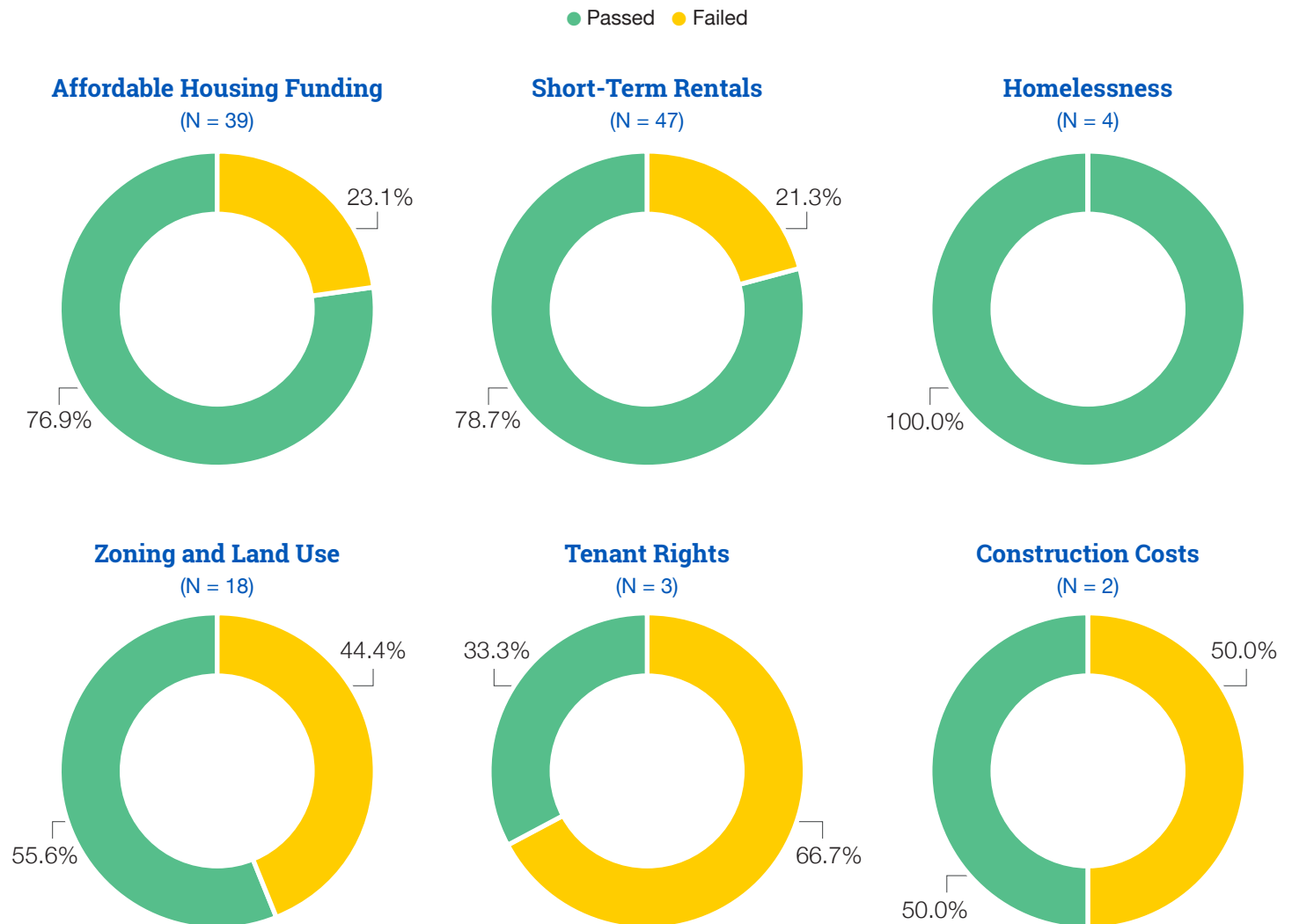
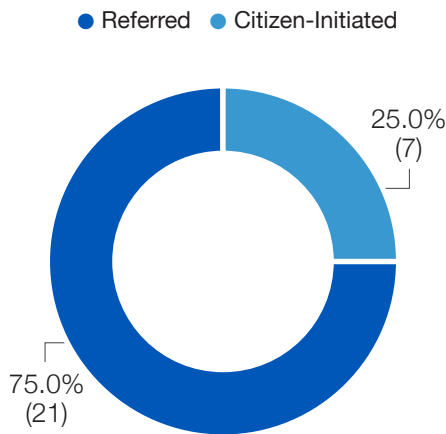


Figure Note: Comparisons should not be made between topic categories due to small sample sizes.

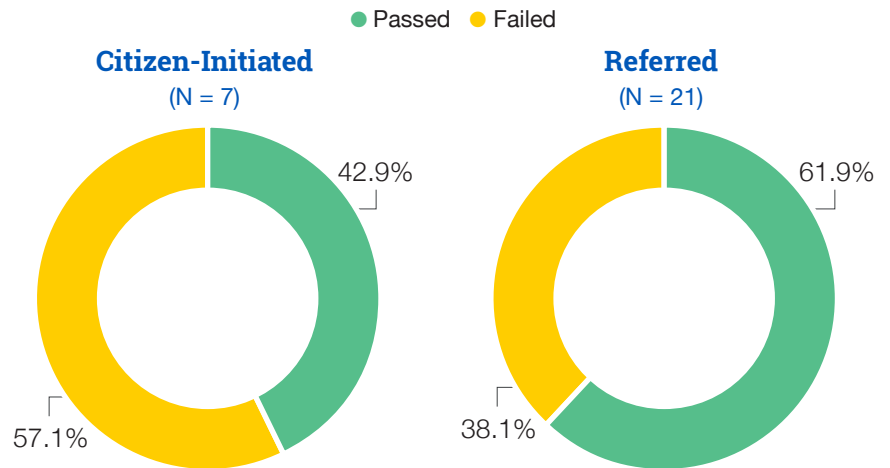
In 2023, CHI and The Colorado Health Foundation began tracking whether local ballot measures were initiated through citizen petitions or referred by a city council or county commission. Between the spring 2023 and spring 2024 elections, three-quarters of measures on the ballot were referred by city councils or county commissions (Figure 5). About half of citizen-initiated measures passed, while about two-thirds of ballot measures referred by a city council or county commission passed (Figure 6).

**FIGURE 5: REFERRED VERSUS CITIZEN-INITIATED RATES**

(SPRING 2023 – SPRING 2024)



**FIGURE 6: SUCCESS OF CITIZEN-INITIATED VERSUS REFERRED BALLOT MEASURES** (SPRING 2023 – SPRING 2024)



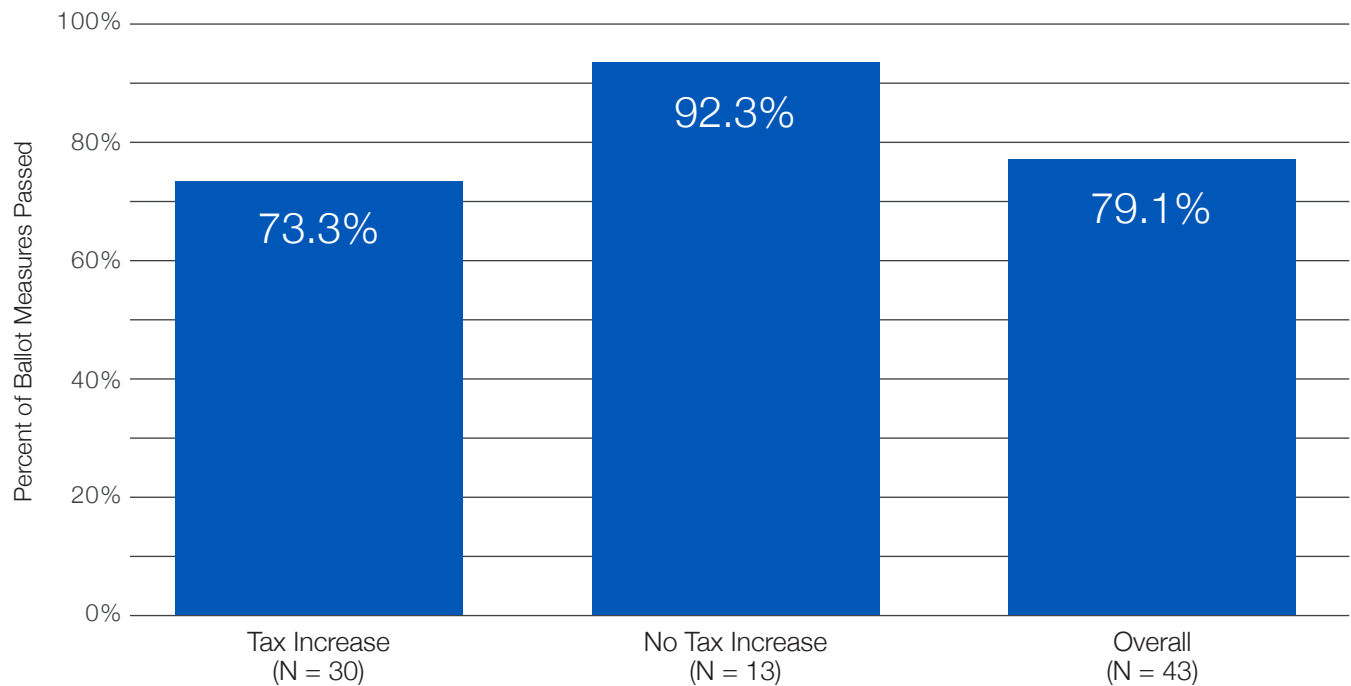
## Revenue Sources

Many measures asked voters to approve funding for housing development, services, or programs. Short-term rental or lodging taxes were the most common sources of revenue for these policies (Figure 7). Most ballot measures with this revenue source proposed an increase in short-term rental taxes, while a handful reallocated or retained existing short-term rental or lodging tax revenue. Unsurprisingly, ballot measures that asked voters to approve funding for housing development, services, or programs without raising taxes were more likely to pass than those that proposed a tax increase (Figure 8). However, nearly three-quarters (73.3%) of ballot measures that asked voters to increase taxes still passed.

**FIGURE 7: REVENUE SOURCES FOR BALLOT MEASURES THAT FUND HOUSING DEVELOPMENT, SERVICES, OR PROGRAMS** (SPRING 2020 – SPRING 2024)



**FIGURE 8: SUCCESS OF TAX AND NON-TAX FUNDED BALLOT MEASURES THAT FUND HOUSING DEVELOPMENT, SERVICES, OR PROGRAMS** (SPRING 2020 – SPRING 2024)



## Geographic Trends

A little under half of local housing measures were placed on ballots in counties designated as urban by the Colorado Department of Local Affairs (see Appendix for methods), while a third were placed on ballots in counties designated as rural resort (Figure 9). Many rural resort communities, such as Estes Park and Vail, struggle to house their workforce due to high housing costs. This may explain why rural resort counties placed more housing measures on the ballot than other rural counties and had the highest proportion of measures that passed (Figure 10).

**FIGURE 9: LOCAL BALLOT HOUSING MEASURES BY RURALITY**

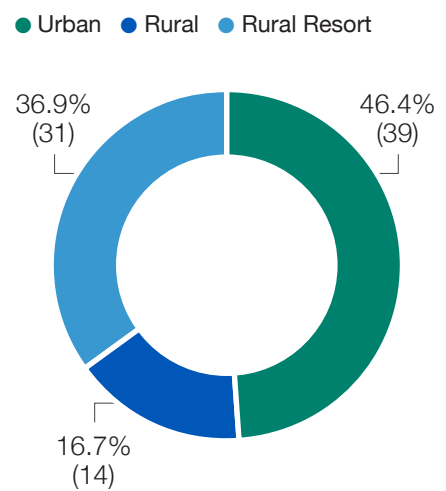
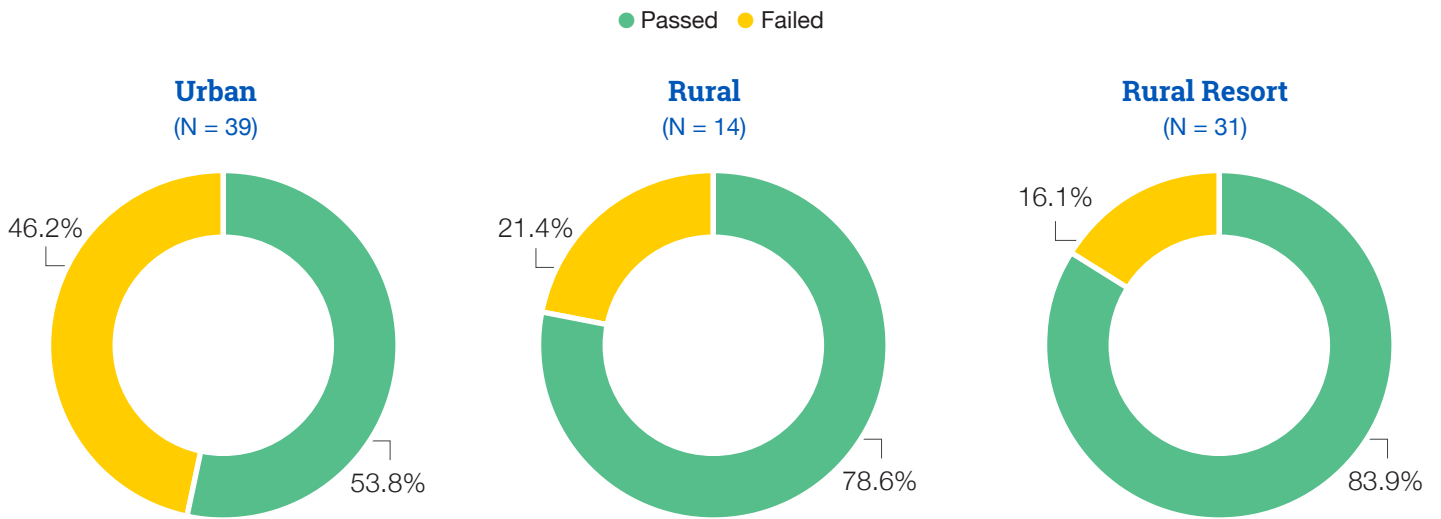


Figure Note: Each category represents the number of measures on ballots in counties designated as urban, rural, or rural resort by the Colorado Department of Local Affairs (DOLA). Estes Park is designated as a rural resort municipality by DOLA and is included in the rural resort category.

**FIGURE 10: SUCCESS OF LOCAL HOUSING BALLOT MEASURES BY RURALITY** (SPRING 2020 - SPRING 2024)

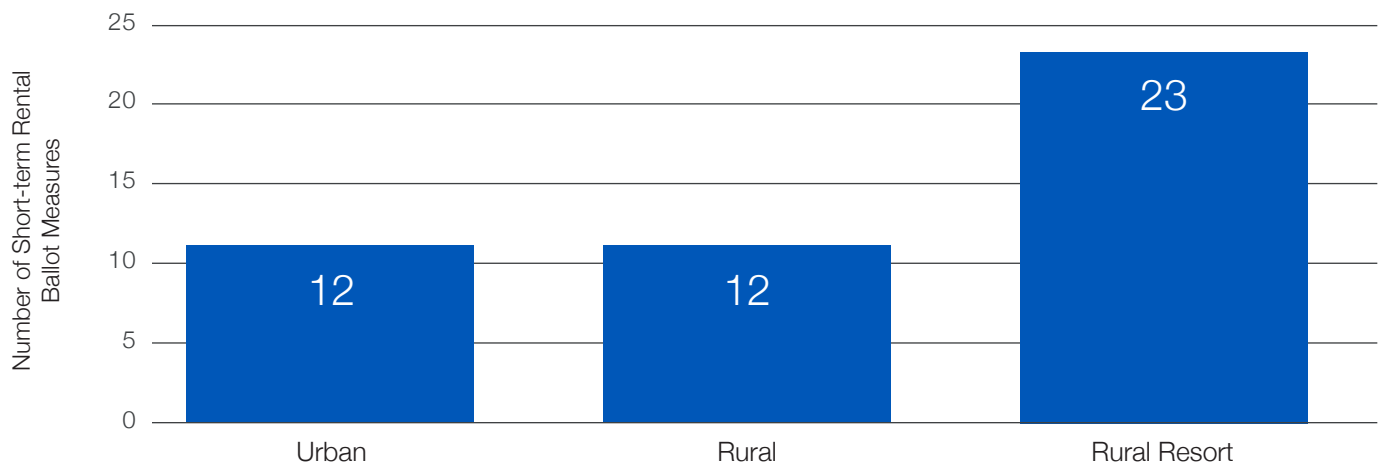


Rural resort counties voted on almost twice the number of ballot measures related to short-term rental or lodging taxes compared with rural and urban counties (Figure 11). These communities were also more likely to tie revenue gains to housing development, services, or programs (Figure 12).

In conversations with CHI staff, local policymakers and advocates said that ballot measures that specify how revenue will be spent tend to be more likely to pass. Voters, they said, want specificity and often do not feel comfortable “writing a blank check.”

Regionally, the San Luis Valley and the Eastern Plains had fewer measures on the ballot over the last four years compared to the Central Mountains, Western Slope, and Front Range (Figures 13 and 14). This may be explained by the fact that no rural resort counties are in these regions. However, community members in these areas struggle to afford housing just like the rest of the state.<sup>3</sup> Advocates and policymakers in the San Luis Valley and Eastern Plains may have an opportunity to use the local ballot, in addition to other policymaking levers, to pass affordable housing policy.

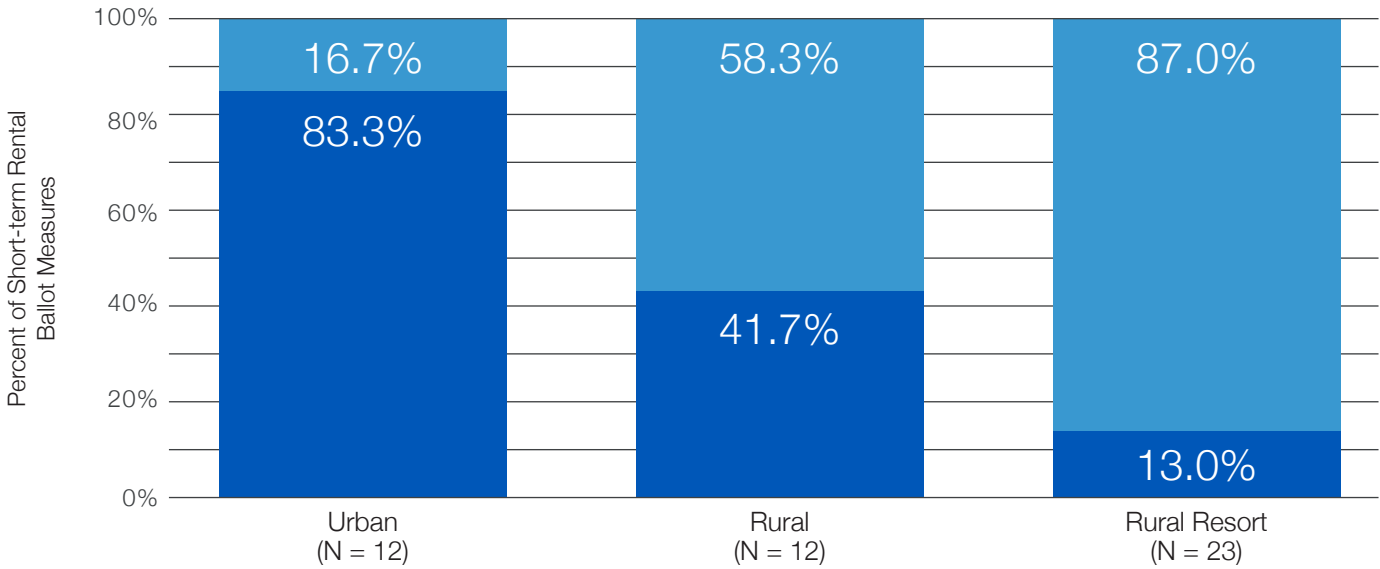
**FIGURE 11: SHORT-TERM RENTAL BALLOT MEASURES BY RURALITY**



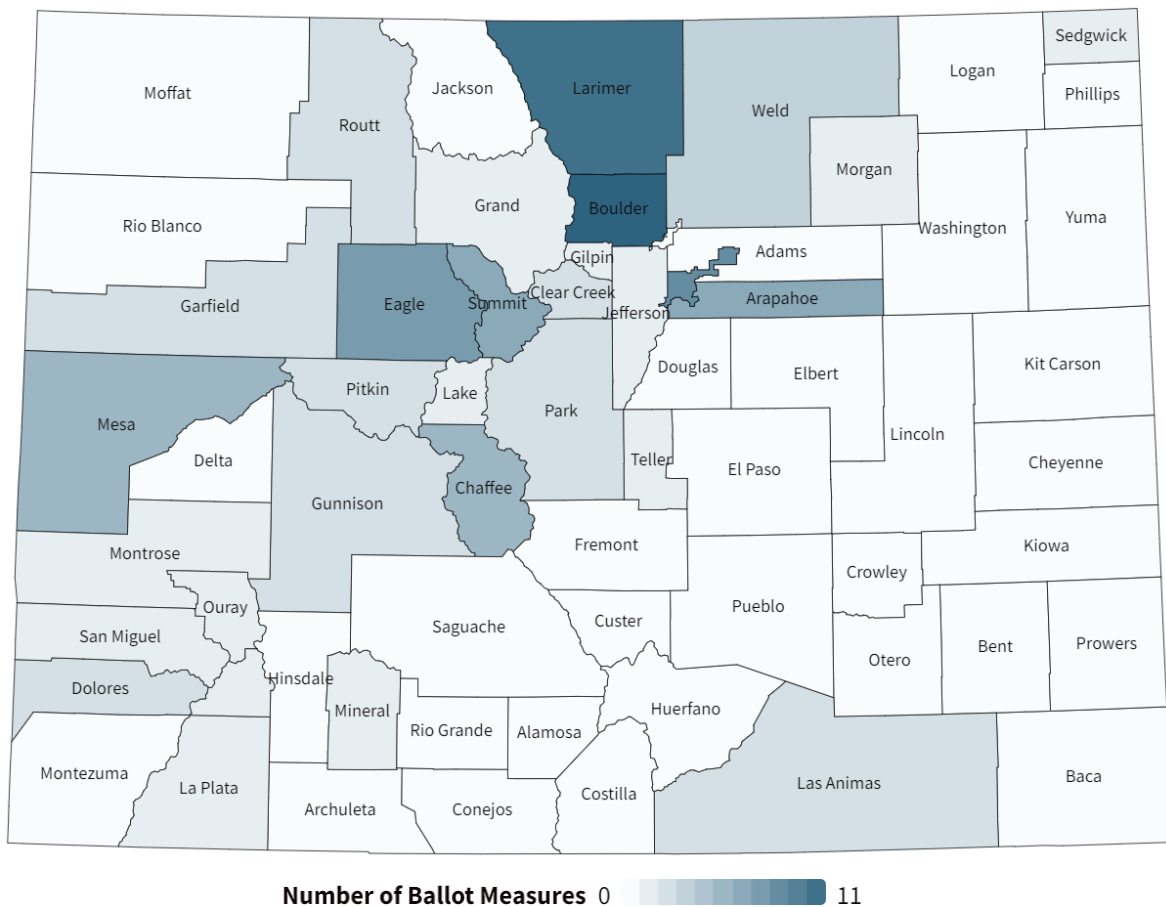
**FIGURE 12: SHORT-TERM RENTAL BALLOT MEASURES BY RURALITY AND FUNDING TIES**

(SPRING 2020 – SPRING 2024)

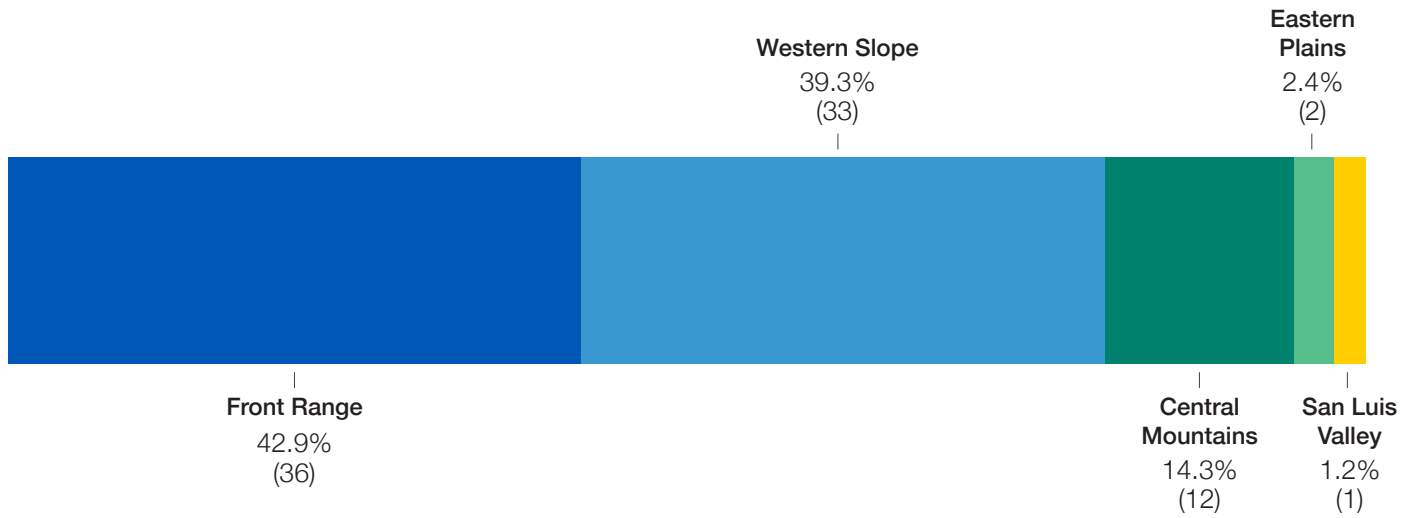
- Short-Term Rental Measures Funding Housing Development, Services, or Programs
- Short-Term Rental Measures Funding General Government Operations



**FIGURE 13: MAP OF LOCAL HOUSING BALLOT MEASURES BY COUNTY** (SPRING 2020 – SPRING 2024)



**FIGURE 14: LOCAL HOUSING BALLOT MEASURES BY REGION** (SPRING 2020 – SPRING 2024)



## Considerations

- Housing can be a broadly popular issue. Building community-wide support among a variety of stakeholders from across the ideological and political spectrum is key to drafting and passing effective and fair ballot measures.
- Housing is top of mind for voters, so many are interested in the specific details of proposed policies. When drafting housing ballot measures, particularly those that propose increasing taxes, advocates should make sure the language is clear and concise and explains how revenue will be used.
- Advocates and policymakers in the San Luis Valley and Eastern Plains have an opportunity to use the local ballot to pass affordable housing policy.
- Ballot measures may take multiple attempts to pass and often require ongoing efforts to monitor implementation. Staying engaged with the community for the long haul is key to both maintain wins and find new ways forward after losses.
- Finally, few communities have used the local ballot to strengthen renters’ rights or address homelessness. The local ballot could provide opportunities for grassroots groups to tackle these issues.

## Conclusion

Local governments have increasingly turned to voters for help in addressing affordable housing. And Colorado voters have been eager to respond, passing more than three-quarters of all affordable housing measures proposed around the state.

Most of the ballot action has played out in wealthier areas of Colorado — the Denver metro area, college towns, and resort communities. The affordable housing crisis has hit these communities especially hard. But agricultural and oil-producing communities also have problems with affordable housing, and they have used the local ballot less often as a mechanism for addressing their challenges.

The Local Ballot Measure Tracker can help advocates for affordable housing — and many other issues — spot trends across the state and figure out how to craft solutions in their own communities.



## Case Study:

# Short-Term Rental Policy in Salida Divides a Community

**Like many Colorado mountain town residents, locals in Salida are struggling to afford housing. Many residents attribute these challenges to inflation, the expansion of short-term rentals, and an influx of new remote worker residents.**

To promote affordable housing efforts, the Salida City Council referred two ballot measures in 2022, asking voters to approve an increase in short-term rental taxes. Ballot Measure 2A imposed a \$1,000 annual license tax for short-term rentals. Ballot Measure 2B increased the occupational sales and use tax on all short-term rental units from \$4.82 a night to \$15.00 per night, per room. Supporters emphasized the need for affordable workforce housing that would be funded

by taxes from the measures. Opponents argued that the tax would unfairly impact residents who rent out their primary homes just to get by. Despite a contentious community debate, both measures passed.

In response, a group of local residents circulated a petition the following year to repeal and replace the 2022 measures with more moderate tax increases. As a result, Question 300 was placed on the 2023 Salida ballot. Question 300 asked voters to decrease the annual license fee to \$540 and to impose this fee only on short-term rental owners who were not Chaffee County residents. It also asked voters to approve a reduction of the occupational sales and use tax from \$15 per night, per room, to \$5. It failed by a 60-40 margin.

The Colorado Health Institute spoke with residents familiar with the ballot measures to understand the challenges, successes, and lessons learned.

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“People like it when you give them something to be excited about, when they can see that they can make a difference, when you explain to them why they should care. I think that everyone wants a better world.”

Advocate from Bringing Everyone Together Through Housing (pro-2A and 2B, anti-300)

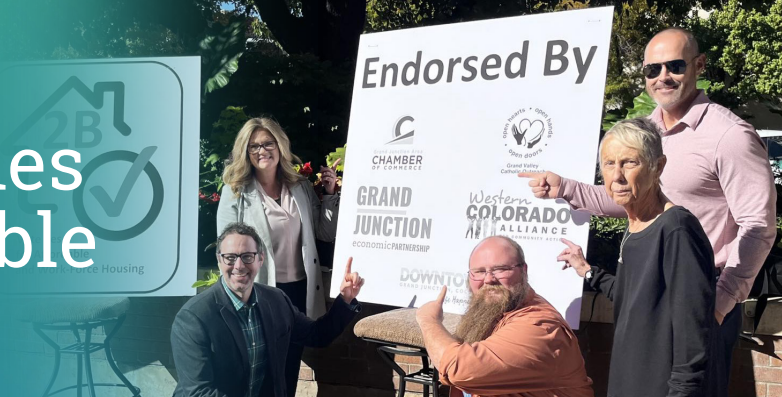
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## Key Takeaways:

- **Advocates must know the context and avoid “one size fits all” policies.** Seeking out and integrating community feedback from a variety of viewpoints can result in more effective and fair policies and prevent community division. Consider that short-term rental ballot measures may have different impacts on urban, rural, and rural resort communities and on residents who rent out primary homes versus those who rent secondary vacation homes.
- **Storytelling is key.** Ballot measures are more likely to pass if advocates and policymakers begin messaging and garnering community support as early as possible.
- **Although short-term rental ballot measures have gained popularity,** the expansion of short-term rental properties is only one factor in the complex problem of housing unaffordability.

## Case Study:

# Grand Junction Comes Together for Affordable Housing Projects



## Grand Junction policymakers learned that the key to passing affordable housing policy in their community is partnership and collaboration.

Prior to the November 2023 election, council members had to get voter approval for any city project that required a lease of city property longer than 25 years, including for affordable housing development.

This constraint made it difficult for local government to respond efficiently to the city's growing affordable housing needs. Changing the lease terms would allow the city to apply for grant funds and to partner with outside organizations on affordable housing projects.

In 2022, the Grand Junction City Council referred Ballot Measure 2C, which let the city lease property for 99 years, instead of the 25-year maximum originally allowed. It narrowly failed in the November 2022 election.

In 2023, council members decided to try again. But this time, they knew they had to build broad community support and address their community's hesitancy to give

government more leeway. City council members referred Ballot Measure 2B, which would allow the city to lease property for 99 years but only for the purpose of affordable housing. City council members also formed an informal advocacy committee of diverse stakeholders, representing the public and private sectors and both sides of the aisle. Committee members included representatives from the Grand Junction Chamber of Commerce, Grand Junction Economic Partnership, Downtown Development Authority, Grand Valley Catholic Outreach, the Grand Junction Housing Authority, and the Western Colorado Alliance. The ballot measure passed.

Advocates and policymakers from Grand Junction who spoke with the Colorado Health Institute attributed this success to the diverse interests represented in the advocacy committee, the specificity of the measure, and the fact that it did not increase taxes. The endorsement of trusted community members and institutions and the narrow focus on affordable housing made the measure more acceptable for voters.

*"The way to get something done in a community is to identify the leaders and identify the opponents and make sure you talk to all of them. [...] You have to be willing to talk to your opposition and listen to them."*

**Bernie Buescher**,  
former Secretary of State,  
Grand Junction Housing Authority Board Vice Chair

## Key Takeaways

- **Building broad support among a variety of stakeholders from across the ideological and political spectrum is key to drafting and passing effective ballot measures.** Housing policies can gain support across partisan leanings because the issue affects everyone.
- **Gaining broad community support is easier when the ballot measure does not increase taxes.** An advocate or policymaker must make a very strong case for tax increases in fiscally conservative communities.
- **Housing ballot measure language should be intentional and strategic.** The purpose of the ballot measure should be clear, so voters don't feel they are authorizing unlimited spending. Keep language as simple as possible.
- **Ballots can become crowded with local-, county-, and state-level measures.** Clear language and effective messaging are even more important when voters have multiple measures to consider.

## Appendix: Methodology

The Colorado Health Institute partners with The Colorado Health Foundation to maintain an online [Local Ballot Measure Tracker](#), which monitors city- and county-level ballot measures across the state. The tracker is a publicly available resource that is continuously updated as new ballot measures are proposed and decided by voters.

Annually, the Colorado Health Institute identifies local ballot measures by compiling sample ballots from each county in Colorado. Local ballot measures that relate to or impact housing issues from Spring 2020 to Spring 2024 are included in this brief. CHI assigned each housing ballot measure to one or more of the following topics (Table 1).

**TABLE 1: HOUSING BALLOT MEASURE TOPICS DEFINITIONS**

Topic Category	Definition
Affordable Housing Funding	Related to the acquisition of land or construction of affordable housing or workforce housing developments, or the funding of housing programs. Examples include purchasing property, partnerships with private, nonprofit, and government sectors, acquiring deed restrictions, and supportive housing programs.
Short-Term Rental	Related to short-term rental or lodging tax increases, regardless of whether revenue is used toward affordable housing funding. A short-term rental is typically defined as a rental of any residential home or accessory building for less than 30 days, but definitions vary between jurisdictions. Short-term rental owners often advertise their properties on sites such as Airbnb and VRBO.
Homelessness	Related specifically to reducing the impact of homelessness or providing services to people who are unhoused. Examples include funding alternative policing services, ordinances banning items such as tents in certain areas of a city, or funding services for people who are unhoused.
Zoning and Land Use	Related to zoning and land use for residential or affordable housing, including annexation, lease lengths on city property, or rule changes for zoning policy decisions.
Tenant Rights	Related to policies that affect tenant rights, such as occupancy limits, rental assistance, or legal assistance when facing eviction.
Construction Cost	Related to taxes on construction or building materials.

To analyze revenue sources proposed by ballot measures to fund housing development, services, or programs, CHI assigned each ballot measure to one of the following revenue source categories (Table 2).

**TABLE 2: REVENUE SOURCE CATEGORY DEFINITIONS**

Revenue Source Category	Definition
Short-Term Rental/Lodging Tax	Ballot measure imposes or amends short-term rental or lodging taxes or reallocates the existing revenue from those taxes, which are paid either by the owner or the occupants. Examples include lodging tax increases paid by occupants, fees or excise taxes paid by owners, or reallocation of revenue from an existing lodging tax to pay for affordable housing development.
Sales and Use Tax	Ballot measure imposes or amends sales and use taxes. Does not include short-term rental or lodging taxes.
Debt Financing	Ballot measure incurs additional debt to fund housing development, services, or programs.
Landlord Excise Tax	Ballot measure imposes an excise tax on landlords of long-term rental property.
Multiple Sources	Ballot measure uses multiple sources of revenue to fund housing development, services, or programs. The single ballot measure included in this report that used multiple revenue sources proposed a community housing tax and sales tax and increased their town debt to fund affordable housing projects.
Other	Ballot measure uses a revenue source other than what is covered by the revenue source categories. Examples include property tax increases and the retention of general tax revenue in excess of TABOR limits. Retention of short-term tax rental revenue in excess of TABOR limits is included in the Short-Term Rental revenue source category.
Not Available	Ballot measure does not propose funding housing development, services, or programs, or general government operations.

To identify geographic trends, CHI categorized Colorado counties as urban, rural, or rural resort, as designated by the Colorado Department of Local Affairs (DOLA).<sup>4</sup> County designations are listed in Table 3.

**TABLE 3: DOLA COMMUNITIES CLASSIFICATIONS**

Classification	Counties
Urban	Adams, Arapahoe, Boulder, Broomfield, Denver, Douglas, El Paso, Jefferson, Larimer (excluding Estes Park), Mesa, Pueblo, Teller, Weld
Rural	Alamosa, Baca, Bent, Cheyenne, Clear Creek, Conejos, Costilla, Crowley, Custer, Delta, Dolores, Elbert, Fremont, Garfield, Gilpin, Hinsdale, Huerfano, Jackson, Kiowa, Kit Carson, Las Animas, Lincoln, Logan, Mineral, Moffat, Montezuma, Montrose, Morgan, Otero, Park, Phillips, Prowers, Rio Blanco, Rio Grande, Saguache, Sedgwick, Washington, Yuma
Rural Resort	Archuleta, Chaffee, Eagle, Grand, Gunnison, La Plata, Lake, Ouray, Pitkin, Routt, San Juan, San Miguel, Summit

CHI categorized Colorado counties into Central Mountains, Eastern Plains, Front Range, San Luis Valley, and Western Slope regions, as defined by the Colorado Department of Local Affairs, State Demography Office.<sup>5</sup> Counties included in each region are listed in Table 4.

**TABLE 4: REGIONS AS DEFINED BY DOLA, STATE DEMOGRAPHY OFFICE**

Region	Counties
Central Mountains	Chaffee, Clear Creek, Custer, Fremont, Gilpin, Huerfano, Lake, Las Animas, Park
Eastern Plains	Baca, Bent, Cheyenne, Crowley, Elbert, Kiowa, Kit Carson, Lincoln, Logan, Morgan, Otero, Phillips, Prowers, Sedgwick, Washington, Yuma
Front Range	Adams, Arapahoe, Boulder, Broomfield, Denver, Douglas, El Paso, Jefferson, Larimer, Pueblo, Teller, Weld
San Luis Valley	Alamosa, Conejos, Costilla, Mineral, Rio Grande, Saguache
Western Slope	Archuleta, Delta, Dolores, Eagle, Garfield, Grand, Gunnison, Hinsdale, Jackson, La Plata, Mesa, Moffat, Montezuma, Montrose, Ouray, Pitkin, Rio Blanco, Routt, San Juan, San Miguel, Summit

## Endnotes

1 National Low Income Housing Coalition. (2024) Out of Reach: The High Cost of Housing. [https://nlihc.org/sites/default/files/2024\\_OOR.pdf](https://nlihc.org/sites/default/files/2024_OOR.pdf)

2 The Colorado Health Foundation. (2024) The Colorado Health Foundation Pulse Poll: 2024 Findings. <https://www.copulsepoll.org/sites/default/files/2024-07/Colorado%20Health%20Foundation%202024%20Pulse%20Survey%20Analysis%20-%20Wave%201%20on%20Costs%20-%20Final%20.pdf>

3 Colorado Health Institute. (2021) Colorado Health Access Survey. [https://www.coloradohealthinstitute.org/sites/default/files/file\\_attachments/2021%20Colorado%20Health%20Access%20Survey%20Storybook.pdf](https://www.coloradohealthinstitute.org/sites/default/files/file_attachments/2021%20Colorado%20Health%20Access%20Survey%20Storybook.pdf)

4 Colorado Department of Local Affairs. (2024) Colorado Community Classifications. <https://dlg.colorado.gov/colorado-community-classifications>

5 Colorado Department of Local Affairs, State Demography Office. (2023) Understanding Colorado Regions. <https://gis.dola.colorado.gov/RegionsMap/>



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