

Hygiene, a human need

PSU study: Lack of basic hygiene access compounds difficulties of homelessness

BY EMILY GREEN
STAFF WRITER

Daryl doesn't like waiting in line for two hours to take a shower. While he'd prefer to shower once per day, he said that while living outside, he's able to shower only about three times a month when he splurges on a motel room.

Daryl is not alone.

Long lines and time limits were among the barriers to good hygiene, a recent survey of 550 Portlanders experiencing homelessness revealed.

While there are homeless service providers and shelters that offer showers, bathrooms and laundry facilities or vouchers, hours and capacity are limited, with demand greatly exceeding supply.

From 2014 to 2016, graduate students at Portland State University's School of Social Work practiced street outreach in various areas of inner Portland to gather data to illustrate what homeless advocates already know: Portland's homeless population faces hardships in accessing facilities to maintain basic human hygiene, and suffering is often compounded as a result.

Study lead Lisa Hawash, a professor of practice with PSU's School of Social Work, recognized access to hygiene facilities as a major issue for Portland's homeless population when she worked at Sisters of the Road. The nonprofit café caters to those who cannot afford a meal and partnered with PSU for the study.

The survey exposes how poor hygiene often adds to the difficulties of homelessness, leading to infections and other health issues, as well as rejection and harassment.

Among survey respondents, 40 percent reported medical problems that could be prevented with proper hygiene, such as staph infections, scabies, lice, open sores and urinary tract infections. Additionally, 22 percent indicated they'd been turned away from shelter for poor hygiene, and 21 percent said they have been denied access to food or services due to their hygiene.

"Another deeper question we were exploring was the criminalization of the lack of access," Hawash said. "That was something we have heard a number of times — people getting tickets and fines and jailed for using the bathroom outside, for example."

Police typically issue "offensive littering" charges for this behavior. Multnomah County District Attorney's Office records show that in 2016, it reviewed 184 cases involving offensive littering. Spokesperson Adam Gibbs said he couldn't determine how many were for failure to use bathroom facilities without a hand-check of each case, but a random sample of 20 cases showed that 11 were issued for urine or feces.

More than 200 survey respondents reported police or private security harassment, and 115 said they'd been

ticketed due to lack of access to hygiene facilities.

Nearly half the study's respondents indicated they typically shower at Transition Projects Inc., or TPI. The Day Center's capacity allows for 100 shower slots and 48 loads of laundry daily.

"The need far exceeds our capacity to meet that need," said Christopher Sage, TPI's Day Center manager. "But we're doing the best we can."

He said the Day Center opens each day at 7 a.m., and the shower list for the day is full by 8 a.m.; although, if someone misses their shower slot, it gets filled with someone else. JOIN offers 40 showers per day, five days a week, and vouchers for a nearby laundry, according to the study.

"They need to give people more time, especially being a woman — you need to shave," said Dee, who said she's spent many hours waiting in line for a shower at TPI, which allows 20 minutes for its showers, including time to undress and dress. Now, she said, she showers at the women's shelter run by Salvation Army, SAFES, where the showers are longer and the lines are shorter. But the price of operating the washer and dryer can be a barrier, she said.

"All we got is what's on us," she said. And she doesn't like getting out of a shower only to put on dirty clothes. When she sees a long line for the showers at SAFES, she usually leaves.

The PSU survey found that for women, there are many additional hygiene-related challenges. "Feminine hygiene is a huge issue," Hawash said. "If you have limited access to showers during your cycle, that just feels awful."

Some women simply want to feel good about themselves, she said. "Wanting to be able to put their makeup on and do their hair, and things like that, because that's important to them," she said.

The study's authors concluded homelessness must be addressed with an array of creative solutions, and the creation of a community hygiene center could be one approach that would meet the needs outlined in the survey.

"I'm not being pessimistic, but we're not going to eradicate homelessness anytime soon in Portland," Hawash said, "and so this is one thing that can provide access to folks who are still living outside."

Panel discussion

Sisters of the Road will host a panel the first weekend in April on the next steps in addressing the lack of hygiene facilities for people experiencing homelessness in Portland. The date and location are yet to be determined. Local businesses, members of the faith community and the public are invited to attend. Panelists will discuss how churches, businesses and other organizations with bathrooms and showering facilities might be able to open their doors to people in need while a more long-term solution — also to be discussed — is underway. For information, email Karissa Moden at karissa@sistersoftheroad.org.

Those surveyed were asked what they would need in a hygiene center. More than 80 percent said they would want laundry facilities. For about half, the center would need to be open seven days a week, and at least 12 to 14 hours per day. Accessible showers, bathrooms and supplies were also important to about half of respondents, and 255 said they would like to have a storage locker space for when they needed to go somewhere they couldn't bring all their items to, such as a job interview.

Hawash said health or first aid services could also be included in a hygiene center. While she said she hopes to share the findings with local policymakers, government funding on all levels is uncertain in today's political climate.

"It leaves a lot of questions about what could happen," she said.

The cost of such a center has not been projected, as it's unknown who would operate the facility and what services it would provide.

"Nobody wants people having to use the bathroom outside. It's undignified, first and foremost," she said. "Second, because it's a public health issue."

In Seattle, the Low Income Housing Institute opened its third Urban Rest Stop in 2015. These hygiene centers offer showers, laundry and bathrooms, as well as overalls for patrons to wear while they wash their clothes. The downtown Seattle location also has on-site barbers and offers health education.

Dee said she's experienced homelessness in Seattle too.

"I love the Urban Rest Stop!" she said when asked about it. "It's much easier to get a shower in Seattle than it is here."

Due to the personal nature of this story, Street Roots changed the names of the people experiencing homelessness who were interviewed about their hygiene habits.

WYDEN, from page 5

than 40 sponsors in the Senate for supporting that legislation. I said, "We're going to mobilize folks at the grass roots," and five days before there was a vote on whether to override the hold block I had on this bill, 15 million Americans weighed in. So we're going to make that kind of fight in opposition to any effort to roll back net neutrality.

E.G.: I wanted to talk about the Email Privacy Act.

(This act would close a loophole that allows the government to access any email or other form of digital communication that's more than 180 days old without a

warrant). It passed the House

unanimously, and it may be a tougher road in the Senate, but if it gets through and becomes law, does that mean that our emails are actually protected? And, does its passing through the House give you hope that maybe Republicans will work with you on privacy issues, such as what Pompeo is suggesting?

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U.S. SEN. RON WYDEN

R.W.: Certainly, the Email Privacy Act is important because it's updating rules that are basically from yesteryear, and the fact that the House has passed it unanimously is certainly a good sign. The challenge will be, particularly in the communications area, supposing a senator pops up — I won't mention any names, but I can think of a couple who would want to attach a piece of legislation to gut net neutrality, and attach it to something like Email Privacy Act. I'm hopeful. It's certainly positive news when you get something passed in the House unanimously, but we're certainly not home free.

E.G.: At the end of the day, and perhaps your answer is "classified," but are there any data collection programs currently being run by the National Security Agency that keep you up at night?

R.W.: I can't get into it, but I'll tell you, the one I talked to you about is certainly one I'm very troubled about. Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act is coming up — I think as I indicated, as communications systems get more sophisticated and more integrated, law-abiding people are going to get swept up in these legitimate targets, and in the hands of the wrong people, that can really be pretty ominous. We can't even get out of the government how many law-abiding people have been swept up in these searches, which leads me to believe it's a larger number than people think.