

# Clean slate

*As the area's homeless figures rise, communities work to address the need for better hygiene on the streets*

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During the last week of September, two portable toilets were placed in downtown Oregon City, providing access to public restrooms in downtown 24 hours a day, every day of the week, for the first time in the city's history.

They're called "Arta Potties," named after the community organization in Salem that installs porta-potties throughout that city's downtown core. The public toilets are painted over with scenes of Oregon City's history. The Oregon City Police Department spearheaded the installation, citing the need for public bathrooms, especially among the city's homeless population.

This effort and others in the region are part of the renewed effort to provide basic hygiene services to people experiencing homelessness. While assistance in food and shelter are commonly discussed by policy advocates and lawmakers, hygiene is often overlooked. But as homelessness in the Portland area increases – by 10 percent, according to this year's biennial point-in-time count – and the region's affordable-housing crisis shows little abatement, more efforts are being made to provide such services to homeless people.

A Portland State University study released this spring surveyed 550 homeless people and found that the majority of respondents "struggle to meet their basic hygiene and health needs because of a shortage of showers, bathrooms and washers and dryers."

This isn't just an odor issue. Not showering or having access to a shower and other hygiene services is linked to methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA), fungal, strep and staph infections, and skin infections such as scabies and head and body lice.

Lack of cleanliness and hygiene could also be one of the main reasons homeless people are so stigmatized by the public.

"It's immediately 'othering,'" said David Bikman, steering committee chair of the Village Coalition, which builds and advocates for tiny home villages for the homeless in Portland. "Being clean is pretty important to your pride and sense of self worth."



PHOTO BY KEN HAWKINS

Top: The Clackamas Service Center, pictured here before the fire, continues to offer hygiene services.

Left: A mobile shower cart on the center's property contains two shower stalls.

Far left: Public "Arta Potties" were placed in downtown Oregon City in September.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ARTA POTTIES



PHOTO BY AMANDA WALDROUPE

In Portland, the availability of hygiene services is patchwork. The day center at Bud Clark Commons, operated by Transition Projects, allows for 100 showers and 48 loads of laundry each day.

JOIN, the outreach agency in outer southeast Portland, offers 40 showers each weekday and vouchers for a nearby laundry, but those showers and the rest of the agency's day center has been closed for much of this year for mold remediation and repairs.

The Portland Loo, the stainless steel, European-style public bathrooms championed by former city commissioner Randy Leonard, was built as a way of providing bathroom services for homeless people.

When they appeared in downtown and the Pearl District, they caused a great deal of controversy and "not in my backyard" backlash. The public's attention and the controversy has since dissipated, and six have been built in Portland in addition to the original four planned by Leonard's office, said Evan Madden, sales and marketing director of Madden Fabrication, the company that builds the loos. The loos are also installed in new parks in Portland and are replacing old brick-and-mortar bathrooms.

Health care is the immediate concern. In the PSU survey, 40 percent of respondents reported medical issues, including staph infections, scabies, lice and open sores – all

of which could be prevented with better hygiene.

But the consequences of poor hygiene can go far beyond health. In the survey, one in five respondents said they were turned away from sleeping in a shelter due to poor hygiene. The same number also said their poor hygiene meant being denied access to food pantries or other services.

Earlier this month, Islamic Social Services of Oregon hosted its annual "Day of Dignity" event, where various agencies provided free medical and dental care, hair cuts, and other services to homeless people. The organization distributed 550 hygiene kits containing toothbrushes, toothpaste, combs, soap, towels and deodorant.

When the Day of Dignity event started 10 years ago, Laila Hajoo, president of Islamic Social Services of Oregon, said that providing hygiene kits was a fundamental part of the service.

"If it were plentiful and easy to get, (people) wouldn't be asking for it," she said.

This year's Day of Dignity event was the first time the Portland Menstrual Society, a Portland State University student group that advocates for access to female hygiene products, participated in the event. Within a few hours, the group handed out 200 kits, each containing enough sanitary pads and tampons to last a week, and 50 menstrual cups.

"Easily, just at our tent, we saw 300 people," said Lynn Hager, the society's founder.

One of those people, Hager said, was a homeless man who told the group that his 12-year old daughter, also homeless, had just started her period.

"When people think of the houseless community, they think about the need for food, shelter, clothes, warm blankets," said Jennee Martinez, a member of PMS. But when it comes to hygiene and menstrual supplies, she said. "It's commonly overlooked."

In July, the Clackamas Service Center closed because of a fire. It is the only homeless services agency of its kind within miles in southeast Portland. But despite the damage, volunteers and staff never stopped offering some its most important services.

Within days of the fire, agency staff set up tables in front of the center's building, offering food and clothes from the clothing closet, distributing mail, and giving out hygiene items such as hand sanitizer and soap. The agency is also renting two portable sinks with hand sanitizer and two port-a-potties. A medical unit from Outside In, a homeless youth services agency, visits the center once a week, and Debra Mason, the center's executive director said, "We needed a presence" so that the medical unit had patients to serve.

The Clackamas Service Center also uses a mobile shower cart, located on its

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