

DC Should Take Steps to Improve Restroom Access

By Kate Coventry

Last week the Committee on Transportation and the Environment held a hearing on [Bill 22-0223](#), the Public Restroom Facilities Promotion and Investment Act of 2017. This bill would create a governmental working group to identify sites to build new public restrooms and develop a program to incentivize businesses to make their restrooms available to the public. These actions are long overdue, as DC has only three 24-hour public restrooms and many businesses limit restroom use to customers.

While many residents and visitors struggle with the lack of easy access to bathrooms, residents experiencing homelessness are particularly affected. Almost all shelters are closed during the day, so residents cannot access the restrooms there. And there is evidence that fewer businesses are allowing non-customers to use their restrooms: The People for Fairness Coalition visited 85 businesses to see if they would allow the general public, and particularly residents experiencing homelessness, to access their restrooms. In 2015, they found that 43, just over half of the businesses, allowed anyone to use their restroom. In Spring 2017, they visited these businesses again and found that only 11 still allowed this access. Most residents experiencing homelessness do not have money to make purchases at these establishments.



The lack of access to bathrooms is not merely an inconvenience—it can have devastating health consequences. Dr. Catherine Crossland of Unity Healthcare [testified](#) about her patients skipping lifesaving blood pressure, heart and HIV/AIDS medications because they can lead to an urgent need for the restroom. The lack of public restrooms can also pose a public health risk: Southern California is experiencing the largest Hepatitis A outbreak since the 1990s because of the lack of toilets and handwashing facilities for residents experiencing homelessness. At least 20 people have died as a result.

The bill envisions a two-pronged approach to create a network of public restrooms. The working group will work with local communities to identify sites for new standalone restrooms, like those in [Portland, Oregon](#), and will develop a program to incentivize businesses to make their restrooms available to the public.

The DC Fiscal Policy Institute encourages the Committee to pass this bill as soon as possible so the working group can get started.