

**Testimony of Kate Coventry, Senior Policy Analyst
At the Performance Oversight Hearing on the Department of General Services
DC Council Committee on Facilities and Procurement
February 28, 2019**

Chairman White and other members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Kate Coventry, and I am the Senior Policy Analyst of the DC Fiscal Policy Institute. DCFPI is a non-profit organization that promotes budget choices to address DC's economic and racial inequities and to build widespread prosperity in the District of Columbia, through independent research and policy recommendations.

I'm here today to discuss the creation of public restrooms as called for in Act 22-0608, the Public Restroom Facilities Installation and Promotion Act of 2018 and to urge the Mayor and Council to fund the Act in the fiscal year (FY) 2020 budget in order to promote restroom access.

Passed unanimously by the Council in late 2018, the Public Restroom Facilities Installation and Promotion Act creates a working group to develop a two-pronged approach to promote restroom access: creating stand-alone restrooms and incentivizing businesses to allow the public to use their restrooms. As a member of this Working Group, the Department of General Services (DGS) will play a critical role in helping to identify appropriate sites for the new standalone public restrooms.

Public restrooms are fundamental to human dignity, and are especially critical for people who are [restroom-challenged](#). When seniors, pregnant women, little children, and people on certain medications have to go, they have to go urgently. Easily accessible, clean, safe restrooms make good business sense and [help foster tourism](#). Knowing that there are public restrooms readily accessible, people are more apt to visit parks, ride their bikes, jog, and walk. As a result, [more and more cities](#) are [investing in public restrooms](#).

Residents experiencing homelessness are also 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 (PFFC) visited 85 businesses in five areas of DC that have high levels of pedestrian traffic and people experiencing homelessness to see if they would allow the general public to access their restrooms. In [2015](#), they found that 43, just over half of the businesses, allowed anyone to use their restroom. In [2016](#), they visited these businesses again and found that 28 allowed access to individuals who weren't customers. In 2017, they visited these businesses again and found that only 11 still allowed this access. They also found, in their 2016 follow up, that businesses discriminated in several ways against a PFFC member experiencing homelessness who visited the restrooms. Most residents experiencing homelessness do not have money to make purchases at these establishments in order to be able to gain access to the restroom.

The lack of access to bathrooms is not merely an inconvenience—it can have devastating health and public health consequences. Dr. Catherine Crossland of Unity Healthcare [testified](#) last year about

her patients skipping lifesaving blood pressure, heart and HIV/AIDS medications because they can lead to an urgent need for the restroom. 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 working group will identify sites with limited access to restrooms that would be appropriate to install a stand-alone bathroom model that is available 24/7, such as the Portland Loo.

The [Loo](#) is a prefabricated structure that takes up an area the size of a parking place. The Loo was designed in Portland in 2007 by an architect, business owners, and community members aiming to maximize safety both inside and out applying Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design principles and ensuring that it be economical and easy to maintain. Selecting an appropriate location for the Loo is very important for ensuring safety. It should be in an area that is visible from a distance and where there is a high level of pedestrian and vehicular traffic. For a Loo to be successful in a given location, it must be in an open visible area and there must be support and monitoring from the surrounding community, such as businesses, Advisory Neighborhood Commissions (ANCs), and neighborhood associations.

Crime prevention features include angled shutters along the bottom and above the eye level that protect privacy while ensuring that one can see how many people are inside. The restroom has an anti-graffiti coating and has lighting outside at night. To minimize installation costs, the site should be near water and sewer connections.

The safety, crime, and cleanliness measures combined with the fact that the Loo is relatively economical to install and maintain, has made it the stand-alone public restroom of choice in over 23 cities in the United States and Canada, including Portland, Oregon; Seattle, Washington; Greeley, Colorado; Salt Lake City, Utah; and Cambridge, Massachusetts; and Victoria, British Columbia.

While visiting Portland, I was able to use the Loo. Visible from several blocks away, the unit was cleaner than most department-store bathrooms and felt very safe as there was pedestrian traffic. When I was as an au pair in Switzerland, I appreciated that almost every town had a bathroom located in the train station or city hall. This greatly reduced my anxiety about traveling with a small child who had just begun potty training.

By increasing access to public restrooms, the District can be a friendlier place for tourists, children and their caretakers, residents with illnesses and disabilities, and residents experiencing homelessness. I urge the Mayor and Council to fund the Public Restroom Facilities Installation and Promotion Act of 2018.

Thank you for the chance to testify and I'm happy to answer any questions.