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How Can Skid Row Toilets Be Kept Clean?

January 23, 2023

HIGHLIGHTS || ○ ○ ○ ○ ●

The Brigade conducted outreach in the community and used its feedback to sound the alarm about the poor state of portable toilets on Skid Row, which could ultimately lead to improved hygiene conditions.



Executive Summary

In 2021, the A-Mark Foundation partnered with the City of Los Angeles' Mayor's Office, the community group Skid Row Brigade, and the ILM Foundation to launch a pilot program to monitor portable toilets placed in Skid Row for people experiencing homelessness. The goal was to test whether having people monitor the toilets and send status reports to the city would enable a more efficient use of resources to keep the toilets in a usable condition. Halfway through the pilot program, the city's contracts with the porta-potty vendors expired and the city pulled the toilets off the streets. Ultimately, the study determined the toilets were in such a bad state at the start of the pilot that we were unable to draw any conclusions about the effectiveness of monitors. In January 2023, the city told us they have ten portable toilets in Skid Row in areas with limited hygiene resources.

Background

In November 2020, the A-Mark Foundation began researching the availability of toilets for people experiencing homelessness in the Skid Row neighborhood of downtown Los Angeles. The goal was to determine the feasibility of providing funding for portable toilets (aka porta-potties) in the area. A 2017 audit by local service providers estimated that Skid Row only met 10%-23% of its residents' bathroom needs, and the COVID-19 pandemic increased the importance of having toilets and handwashing stations available.^[1]

In addition to cost, one major consideration was whether Los Angeles would grant A-Mark permission to install portable toilets, given the history of California cities resisting the installation of porta-potties by other organizations.^[2] Authorities in Sacramento and Anaheim removed toilets from encampments, citing a lack of authorization.^[3] ^[4] Orange County required a \$2,000 permit, liability insurance, and a long-term maintenance agreement. Even then, the county supervisors would not approve the project.^[5]

Partnering with the Los Angeles Mayor's Office

Starting in late January 2021, A-Mark emailed and called the LA mayor's office, local nonprofits, the Department of Public Works, and various people mentioned in news articles who seemed relevant to this area of inquiry. We were unable to reach anyone until we finally made contact with Councilmember Kevin De Leon's office, who introduced us to the Director of Skid Row Strategy in the Mayor's Office of City Homeless Initiatives at that time, Kirkpatrick Tyler.

When we spoke with the Los Angeles mayor's office about our interest in providing toilets, they told us they had added dozens of portable toilets in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In February 2021, the city had an estimated 55 porta-potties in Skid Row, an area that comprises 55 square blocks and holds what the mayor's office calls the "highest concentration of unhoused individuals nationwide," with more than 4,600 people experiencing homelessness.^[6] According to the city, approximately 500-750 people were using each of the toilets every month.

Rather than more portable toilets, the city said that Skid Row needed monitors to check on the existing toilets twice a day and report on the conditions so the city could allocate resources more effectively to clean and restock supplies. Monitors could help alleviate

problems such as porta-potties being vandalized, moved, or misused for drugs or prostitution.

In May 2020, the United Way provided three months of funding for a monitoring program that helped enforce better treatment of the toilets because people who lived in the community were involved. Since that funding ended, the city had a gap to fill.

Toilet Monitoring Pilot Program

A-Mark signed an agreement with the Los Angeles mayor's office to fund a three-month pilot program for portable toilet monitoring at a cost of \$10,000 per month, running from May 10, 2021, through August 10, 2021. The grant included an additional \$2,000 to purchase uniforms, vests, gloves, masks, and other supplies for the monitors, for a total cost of \$32,000.

A community group called the [Skid Row Brigade](#) worked as the monitors, sending real-time reports on the status of the toilets and handwashing stations to the city. The [ILM Foundation](#) served as the fiscal agent to track the monitors' hours and disburse the grant stipends.

The goal of the pilot program was to learn whether monitoring the porta-potties would keep the units in a usable condition for the community. To evaluate this, the city tracked monitor scores for cleanliness, supply stocking, and functionality. If we could show improvement during the three months, we would then seek out other funding sources to sustain the monitoring program.

Before the pilot began, the city used input from the Skid Row Brigade to update its map of the neighborhood into four zones and number the toilets to make it easier to track them. During the first week of monitoring, the Brigade re-established connections throughout the community and spoke to unhoused people about helping to care for the porta-potties in their area.

Results

The LA mayor's Office of City Homeless Initiatives wrote in its month one report:

“The Skid Row Brigade submitted 270 reports monitoring 49 porta-potties, and 24 handwashing stations. More important than the number of reports and units is what the first month of monitoring revealed. Due to the diligent work of the Brigade, we found that many of the hygiene units had been vandalized, damaged and even burned down and that those units that had not suffered some abuse had not received regular service, maintenance and restocking. Additionally the Brigade identified units that were being underutilized because of the location they were placed.”

The report noted that month one scores for cleanliness and supplies were very low and suggested that many of the units had not been serviced for weeks before our program started. The average monitor cleanliness score was 2.38 out of 5.0, and toilet paper was stocked in 8.9% of toilets, while 5.6% of sinks had paper towels, 10.3% had soap, and 24% had water. Only 35.1% of the units were functioning at full capacity.

Some accomplishments in the first month included a 20% reduction in the response time for unit replacement and servicing, replacing six damaged toilets, relocating toilets to areas with higher needs, and designating Hygiene Unit Block Captains to watch over the portable toilets.

The end of the City of Los Angeles's fiscal year, June 30, 2021, came ten days before the end of our program's second month. Since the city's contracts with the toilet vendors were expiring at that time, the city decided to remove all porta-potties from the streets and re-evaluate their strategy for meeting the hygiene needs of the unhoused population. As a result, our three-month pilot program was cut short.

Our understanding was that the city chose not to renew the contracts because many of the toilets were unusable from not being cleaned or emptied often enough, so they became a health hazard. The Brigade reported feedback from the community that having unclean toilets in their living areas was more harmful than having no toilets.

In January 2023, the city told us they had placed ten portable toilets in Skid Row in areas with limited hygiene resources. They receive daily service reports and staff in the mayor's office walk around the area throughout the week to check on the toilets.

Impact

In retrospect, it seems that the toilets in Skid Row were largely in an unusable state at the start of our monitoring program, to the extent that no level of monitoring could improve the conditions. The monitors' reports raised questions about whether the vendors were servicing the toilets as required by their contracts, further complicating our attempts to track the impact of sending real-time status reports to the city.

While we were not able to complete the three-month pilot program for toilet monitoring in Skid Row, the work did have some value for the community:

- The city said that the information gathered by the Brigade about toilet locations would give them a head start in knowing where to place new toilets and helped identify people in the community who will help watch over the new toilets.
- We funded supplies for the Brigade that they were able to keep for future volunteer projects.
- The Brigade conducted outreach in the community and used their feedback to sound the alarm about the poor state of portable toilets on the streets, which we hope will ultimately lead to improved hygiene conditions.

References

- 1 Los Angeles Central Providers Collaborative, Skid Row Community Residents and Partners, "No Place to Go: An Audit of the Public Toilet Crisis in Skid Row," June 2017, <https://lafa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/No-Place-To-Go-final.pdf>
- 2 When we eventually made contact with the City of Los Angeles, we were told that if portable toilets were installed without their knowledge, they would call the vendors to retrieve them because unattended toilets can cause issues.
- 3 Carla Green, "California City Confiscates Toilets from Homeless Residents – Forcing Them to Use Buckets," The Guardian, September 8, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/sep/08/anaheim-homeless-toilets-confiscated-public-health-crisis>
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- 5 Theresa Walker, "Supervisor pledges to pay for \$2,000 permit for portable toilets at Santa Ana River trail near homeless camp," The Orange County Register, May 23, 2017, <https://www.ocregister.com/2017/05/23/supervisors-might-allow-portable-toilets-for-homeless-at-santa-ana-river-trail-after-todd-spitzer-says-hell-cover-cost-of-2000-permit/>
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