

Eng 50 AoW 2: "A Skid Row Toilet Crisis, But No Easy Answers"

NAME _____

Directions: Print this form and the article that follows. Read the article first and then fill out this form. Staple it to the article and turn both in. You will need a **highlighter**, a pen, a stapler, and a dictionary.

1. Read the article carefully and **annotate** the story by writing on it. **Highlight** key passages; write in the margins to show evidence of a close reading, your reactions, or your confusion. (2 pts.)
2. Introduce this article by author and "Title" and explain in your own words what it is about. (2 pts.)
3. In your own words, explain why providing the needed public toilets would be an expensive investment for Los Angeles and its taxpayers. (2 pts.)
4. In your own words, explain what Officer Deon Joseph means when he says there have been "repercussions" related to public toilets in Skid Row. (2 pts.)
5. Should Los Angeles provide restroom facilities for homeless people living on the streets? Why or why not?

Your points _____ / 10 = _____

A Skid Row Toilet Crisis, But No Easy Answers

By Eddie Kim

The challenges in Skid Row continue: A recent audit from a consortium of neighborhood groups shows that the thousands of homeless people in the impoverished community have less access to toilets than refugees in places such as Syria, based on the United Nations' standard for hygiene.

The audit found just nine public toilets available overnight for the 1,800 unsheltered people sleeping in Skid Row. The community would need another 89 toilets at night to meet the UN standard of no more than 20 people per toilet in long-term refugee camps.

The situation is worse during the day, when shelters release overnight occupants. The audit found the community is short of the UN standard by 186 public toilets.

The UN criteria notes that a dwelling should be no more than 50 meters from a toilet. Many homeless individuals now must choose whether to walk several blocks in the middle of the night, or relieve themselves near their shelter on the street or sidewalk.

"This is a crisis, and we need everyone at the table," said Suzette Shaw, a Skid Row resident who was part of the audit team. "The mayor's office is interested, we need City Council, we need service providers, everyone to roll up their sleeves."

The audit, dubbed "No Place to Go," was conducted by representatives from a variety of groups, including service providers the Downtown Women's Center, Homeless Health Care L.A., Inner City Law Center and the advocacy group Los Angeles Community Action Network.

Skid Row has a handful of toilet options, with the most visible being the large capsule-like automatic public toilets, or APTs. They are designed to detect when someone enters, automatically lock and be self-cleaning. The other primary options are public toilets at service providers and shelters, which are only available at certain times.

The problem extends beyond too few toilets. The APTs, despite being designed to operate 24/7, are shut down at night. Other facilities sometimes lack doors or are filthy. Many homeless individuals, said the audit, do not like being screened by security guards, who are also the gatekeepers for rations of toilet paper and even feminine hygiene products.

The findings have surprised no one familiar with Skid Row. Estela Lopez, executive director of the Central City East Association, said its Industrial District Business Improvement District staff received 262 requests from January through March for pressure washings to clean sidewalks of human waste.

"People in Skid Row are fighting over space and it's bodies on top of bodies," Lopez said. "A pressing question is, if we put toilets and other amenities in this one place, are we taking care of homeless elsewhere? Will it increase the demand in Skid Row?"

The solution isn't as simple as just placing more port-a-potties on the street. Deon Joseph, senior lead officer with the Los Angeles Police Department, who has extensive experience in Skid Row, said APTs and traditional portable toilets can

become hubs of crime. He has seen numerous people entering APTs for drug deals and prostitution.

Other times people try to jam or break the machine so the door won't automatically open after 10 minutes, as they're designed to, he said. He has also seen criminals charge homeless people to use a portable toilet — unless the person buys their drugs or prostitutes.

"I don't want to see people in danger, getting robbed or raped in a public toilet," Joseph said. "The homeless absolutely have a right and need to safe bathrooms, but there have been these kinds of repercussions in the past with adding portable toilets."

Various solutions have been tried over the last 30 years. About a decade ago, the city contracted to pay for the APTs at \$250,000 a pop in exchange for advertising rights on municipal transit "furniture" (bus shelters, kiosks, etc.).

The 20-year contract suggested up to 150 APTs could be built citywide, but the trickle of ad revenue has paid for less than a dozen, including the four in Skid Row. The report found they work just 20% of the time.

That the APTs are not operable at night is news to the office of 14th District City Councilman José Huizar. His office's policy director, Martin Schlageter, said that a follow-up is needed to figure out why that is occurring.

The new audit follows a 2013 report from the county Department of Public Health that found that public toilets are frequently broken. It recommended the city build more public restrooms in Skid Row.

The city Department of Recreation and Parks is constructing two permanent restrooms at Gladys and San Julian parks, and Mayor Eric Garcetti has identified \$1.3 million in his 2017-18 budget for mobile shower and bathroom services citywide. The budget also shows \$500,000 proposed for "Skid Row bathroom cleanups" as part of the \$2.1 million set aside for Operation Healthy Streets, the city program that cleans the sidewalks in Skid Row while conducting homeless outreach.

The report examined San Francisco's Pit Stop program, which pairs portable toilets with attendees hired from the neighborhood. By the audit's "very rough" estimation, \$1 million would be needed to buy 100 portable toilets and handwashing stations, and it would cost \$1.6 million annually to staff them around the clock.

Another \$1.2 million a year would be needed to maintain the toilets, and the audit suggests \$840,000 annually to pay service providers to open their restrooms and provide attendants. Additionally, \$720,000 is needed each year to pay for more supplies, the report concluded.

Schlageter indicated that some work can be done, but no comprehensive solution is clear.

"We still feel that there's some opportunity to expand on maybe providing funds so service providers or shelters can increase staffing and access to their bathrooms. It won't create 100 toilets, but a bit," Schlageter said. "How to get 100 more is, to be honest, a major challenge at this point."