



URBAN  
ALCHEMY

Sanitation Systems and Houselessness in Portland

*Urban Alchemy* is a collaborative, interdisciplinary art project started in 2019.

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# The Sour Sewer

When I was in Vienna last summer, I met up with some friends at the Danube Canal. It started to rain heavily and one of my friends, a water engineer, knew that the storm water system gets overwhelmed in this kind of weather. The result: a bunch of shit water flowing right into the canal in the heart of the city. Later I learned that this is what happens in a combined sewer overflow (CSO).

Spending about 1.4 billion dollars, Portland tried to eliminate this system with the Big Pipe Project in 2011 to prevent sewer water from flowing into the Willamette river.

Early in the project I decided to take a tour of the North Portland Waste Water Treatment plant, managed by the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality. John Petty, a plant operator, gave me a very generous and extensive tour. Without much effort he tells me which pipe channel gets how many millions of gallons where in Portland. At the end of the tour I ask him some questions:

Johanna: What do you wish the general public would understand about wastewater treatment?

John: What not to put down the pipe. Fat, oil and grease should go down to the landfill if possible now this plant is going to get set up to handle fat, oil and grease but we are going to recover it from businesses and restaurants and places that generate it in mass quantities and make it economical to recover. The small daily doses of cleaning out bacon pans kind of clogs things up. And putting action figures down Mum and Dad's toilets is not a good idea.

Johanna: Do you get a lot of action figures?

John: Well there is a whole collection in one of the buildings.

Johanna: That was actually my next question. What kind of objects do you recover here at the plant?

John: If it can fit down a four inch hole it comes to the plant. No restrictions. 50 dollar bills, cell phones, licenses, we even get inmate ID cards.

Johanna: Do you think dry toilets could become an alternative to flush toilets?

John: Yes. I think it's going to take all of the above. Anything and everything we can do to concentrate and contain. The other way is diluting and disbursing. Diluting and disbursing is eventually going to have a negative impact. The smarter we can be about collecting and treating the better.

Johanna: Do you think in an urban, densely populated environment it is possible to contain instead of dilute?

John: Well we are going to have to think of something. I think the whole human race needs to get smarter. We are running out of time folks.

Johanna: Thank you!

Clueless about the sewer and wastewater treatment as I was going in I can't say that I found myself less confused after I left. I saw pipes, pumps, filters, I heard strange noises, I smelled a delightful mixture of chemicals and fecal matter - it was quite the experience. The cost of it all, the incredibly complex engineering, the vulnerability of the system in the face of earthquakes or large amounts of rain made me a little nervous.

I then talked to Mathew Lippincott a designer, who worked with the non-profit

“If it can fit down a four inch hole it comes to the plant. No restrictions. 50 dollar bills, cell phones, licenses, we even get inmate ID cards.”

organization PHLUSH (Public Hygiene Let us stay Human) to develop the Sewer Catastrophe Companion.

Johanna: Do you think dry toilets could become an alternative to the sewer system? Do you think this would be a viable alternative even for densely populated urban areas?

Mathew: Yes I do, I think that dry toilet systems could completely replace our current model of wipe, flush and forget sanitation. I think that it would take a very long time. Infrastructure change happens on a very long term basis. In new construction I think the technology is at hand to do that, especially in newly constructed apartment buildings. The Bullitt

Center up in Seattle uses foam flush toilets into a composting toilet system and those are really quite pleasant. The system is a one-off though, built by Advanced Composting Systems in Montana. They are not a mass produced option but they demonstrate the feasibility. I also think that vacuum toilets have a lot of potential and those systems can be retrofitted into existing buildings. Vacuum pipes are flexible enough to be snaked into the walls of apartment buildings. And I think that handling waste on site--which can happen in a current flush or dry toilet system--is going to be an increasingly popular option. The InSinkEerator company actually just released a vacuum line system of food waste grinders in commercial kitchens. So instead of throwing food waste down the sink, you can push waste into it and grind it up and send it to a compost pile. I think that systems like that, that can process organic household waste and send it to a container collection and that could accept toilet waste offer an actual selling point. Not just an envi-



Wastewater treatment plant, photo by Johanna Oppeck



Wastewater treatment plant, photo by Johanna Oppeck

ronmental selling point but also human livability selling point. I think that that's really possible. On a more engineered level you see systems like Hassalo at 8th, like the construction in the Loyd district where they process water on-site. They don't have a sewer hook-up. They have a membrane bioreactor in the basement where they process all the water on-site. So that's a more traditional flush system, pretty high energy, that involves a treatment plant in the basement but I think that's going to be a growing option too. I think across the board, local handling of waste and higher degrees of treatment on site are going to be increasing options. And I think that technologies such as vacuum toilets offer a lot of possibilities in dense buildings.

Johanna: What got you interested in toilets and the sewer system?

Mathew: I was traveling through a farm that had a really terrible bucket toilet system and at the time I had a design interest in restrooms, I was mainly interested in water around sinks and showers. I hadn't really thought about toilets. And then I caught myself working on some plumbing equipment at this shower on the farm and kind of fell into this spiral that I might get sepsis because their water system was potentially running off from the compost system where they were processing human waste. So kind of in that moment of terror, I recognized that I had this blind spot for toilets and restroom issues and that it was a really fascinating engagement with the built environment and also with our broader environment. Because it is through our excreta that we participate in the ecosystem, we intake food, put out this nutrient rich excreta; our daily relationship to our environment is how we handle these nutrient cycles.

Johanna: What do you wish people would understand about our current sewer system?

Mathew: I think that the biggest misconception is that it collects sewage.

“People think that the sewer system collects sewage and takes it into a wastewater treatment plant. That’s not really true.”

People think that the sewer system collects sewage and takes it into a wastewater treatment plant. That's not really true. Newly constructed sewer systems will collect about 95% but most of our sewer systems that are being well maintained in the city are collecting about 85% of the sewage. Fundamentally the idea that we are currently collecting sewage and treating our excreta is just not true. We are currently collecting at best 5% of it and then we are doing some limited treatment. And also that our current system depends on the reuse of nutrients and water. Septic tanks discharge to aquifers, they treat aquifers as an open sewer and a source of the water. So they are really a septic tank and an aquifer recharge system - not a good one, but that's what it does. And with sewers - these nutrients end up somewhere, they end up in the ocean, they end up in rivers. And we drink sewage. Not necessarily here in Portland, but in most cities they are drinking sewage. So our current system depends on reuse, we just do our best not to talk about it. And it depends on waste, we just do our best to ignore it. So I think when you recognize the realities of what excreta reuse looks like today, it's easier to imagine what it might look like tomorrow. If you don't think it's occurring now--which seems to be the popular perspective--then it's hard to get your mind around doing it in the future.

## THE SACRED SHIT - THE SHIT CULTURE

### Friedensreich Hundertwasser

Vegetation needed millions of years  
to cover poison and gloomy gases  
with a layer of humus  
a layer of vegetation  
and a layer of oxygen  
so that man can live on this earth  
And this same unthankful man digs out again  
the same poisonous substances which have been  
covered  
with long and tedious cosmic labour  
and puts it again on the surface  
So, by the misdeed of man  
the end of the world  
will be like the beginning of times  
We commit suicide  
Our cities are cancerous formations  
From above this is clearly visible  
We do not eat what grows near us  
we fetch our food from far away  
from Africa, America, China and New Zealand  
We do not keep our shit for ourselves  
our shit is carried far away  
polluting rivers, lakes and oceans  
or it is sent to sophisticated  
and costly purification plants  
seldom to centralised compost factories  
or our shit is destroyed  
Our shit never returns to our fields  
and never returns there  
where our food came from  
THE CYCLE FROM EATING TO SHITTING  
FUNCTIONS  
THE CYCLE FROM SHITTING TO EATING IS  
INTERRUPTED  
We have wrong conceptions  
about our waste  
Every time we use the flush toilet  
we think it is a hygienic accomplishment  
but in fact we violate cosmic law  
Because, in truth, it is an immoral act  
a wicked act of death

It is as if we draw a dead line  
When we use the toilet  
we lock ourselves in  
and flush our shit away  
Why are we ashamed?  
What are we afraid of?  
What becomes of our shit afterwards?  
We suppress it like the death  
The toilet hole into which disappear things  
seems to us like the door to death  
Let us rush away  
let us forget quickly decomposition and decay  
But it is just the contrary  
With the shit life begins  
THE SHIT IS MUCH MORE IMPORTANT  
THAN EATING  
Eating is sustaining a mankind  
which grows in quantity  
and lessens in quality  
and which became a deadly danger to this earth  
to the vegetation, to the animals  
to the water, the air and to the layer of humus  
But shit is the way to our resurrection  
Since man can think  
he tries to be immortal  
Man wants to have an eternal soul  
THE SHIT IS OUR ETERNAL SOUL  
THROUGH THE SHIT WE WILL SURVIVE  
THROUGH THE SHIT WE BECOME  
IMMORTAL  
Why do we fear death?  
He who uses a humus toilet  
does not fear death  
because our shit makes future life  
makes our rebirth possible  
IF WE DO NOT TREASURE OUR SHIT  
AND IF WE DO NOT TRANSFORM IT  
INTO HUMUS  
IN HONOUR OF GOD AND THE WORLD  
WE LOSE OUR RIGHT  
TO BE PRESENT ON THIS EARTH  
IN THE NAME OF OBSOLETE AND  
WRONG SANITARY LAWS  
WE LOSE OUR COSMIC SUBSTANCE  
WE MURDER AND DESTROY OUR  
FUTURE LIFE  
DIRT IS LIFE



## STERILE CLEANNES IS DEATH

You shall not kill  
 but we sterilise all life with poison and a layer  
 of concrete  
 This is murder  
 Man is just a tube  
 On the one side he puts things in  
 on the other side they come out again  
 more or less digested  
 The mouth is in front, the anus is behind  
 Why is that so?  
 Why is eating positive?  
 Why is the shit negative?  
 It should be the contrary  
 What is coming out of our body is not waste  
 but the basis of our world  
 our gold, our blood  
 We bleed to death  
 our civilization is bleeding to death  
 our earth is bleeding to death  
 caused by the insane interruption of the cycle  
 He who is bleeding for a long time  
 losing blood for a long time  
 and does not replace it with new blood  
 will perish  
 Freud was right in his interpretation of dreams  
 that shit stands for gold  
 Now we have to learn  
 that this is not just a dream but reality  
 If Pasolini in a film lets actors eat their shit  
 this action is to be understood  
 as a desperate symbol of closing the cycle  
 as a desperate acceleration of cosmic survival  
 The same love, the same time and care  
 must be employed  
 for what comes out from "behind"  
 than for what comes in in "front"  
 The same ceremony  
 like when we dine in solemnity  
 with knife, fork and spoon, Chinese chopsticks  
 silver table service and candle light  
 We pray before we eat and say grace after-  
 wards  
 but we do not pray when we shit  
 WE THANK GOD FOR OUR DAILY  
 BREAD  
 WHICH COMES OUT OF THE EARTH

## BUT WE DO NOT PRAY

SO THAT OUR SHIT BECOMES EARTH AGAIN  
 WASTE IS BEAUTIFUL  
 TO DIVIDE THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF WASTE  
 AND TO REINTEGRATE THEM INTO THE  
 CYCLE  
 IS A HAPPY OCCUPATION, FULL OF JOY  
 This occupation does not take place  
 in cellars, dark courtyards  
 in dung pits and narrow toilets  
 but there where we dwell  
 where there is light and sun  
 in our living room, in our state room  
 There is no waste  
 waste does not exist  
 The humus toilet is a status symbol  
 WE HAVE THE PRIVILEGE TO BE WITNESSES  
 OF HOW, BY OUR OWN WISDOM  
 OUR OWN WASTE, OUR OWN SHIT TURNS  
 BACK INTO HUMUS  
 IT IS LIKE A HARVEST WHICH IS RIPENING  
 LIKE A TREE WHICH GROWS  
 AT HOME AS IF IT WAS OUR OWN SON  
 HOMO - HUMUS - HUMANITAS  
 three words, the same origin, the same destiny  
 HUMUS IS THE REAL BLACK GOLD  
 Humus has a beautiful scent  
 the scent of humus is more sacred and nearer to God  
 than the scent of incense  
 He who walks through the woods after the rain  
 knows this scent  
 Of course, it seems a monstrosity  
 when our garbage can  
 comes into the center of our home  
 and when the humus toilet becomes our seat of  
 honour  
 But this is just the turn  
 which our society, our civilization  
 must take if we want to survive  
 The scent of humus is the scent of God  
 the scent of resurrection  
 the scent of eternal life

# The Portland Sanitation War



**“That is the explanation of war, an outrage by humanity upon humanity, in despite of humanity.”**  
**- Victor Hugo**



Artifacts, photo by Johanna Oppeck

In some parallel universe, the toilet graveyard at the ReBuilding Center in Portland is an artifact of the sanitation war.

Sanitation services are part of everybody's daily life. We all need a place to put our trash, a place to poop and pee and a place to shower. Those of us who are fortunate enough to be housed, disburse and dilute everything we deem as waste discreetly and perceive it as disorderly when unhoused people do the same visibly. The result: conflict. On one front people feel like their daily living is being disrupted by the impact of houselessness, on the other front people are being displaced, dispossessed and are not provided with what they need for basic survival. Public space is slowly becoming a not so subtle war zone. Sanitation crews are send out on a daily basis to act as peacekeepers in a system where change across the board is long overdue.

**“As long as  
people are  
alive, they  
need to  
poop.”**



## Nine Bathrooms for 2,000 people

I remember how annoyed I was by the absolute lack of public trash cans when I first moved to Portland from Austria. Annoyed that I had to carry my dogs' poop in a bag until I got back to my apartment complex, that I had to carry my paper coffee cup around for several blocks. Slightly inconvenienced as I was, I still always had a giant dumpster at my home base. What are people supposed to

**“More access to sanitation is going to make it better for all of us. Public perception is one of the greatest barriers for access to sanitation - people don't want to see porta potties out there” - Lance Hamel**

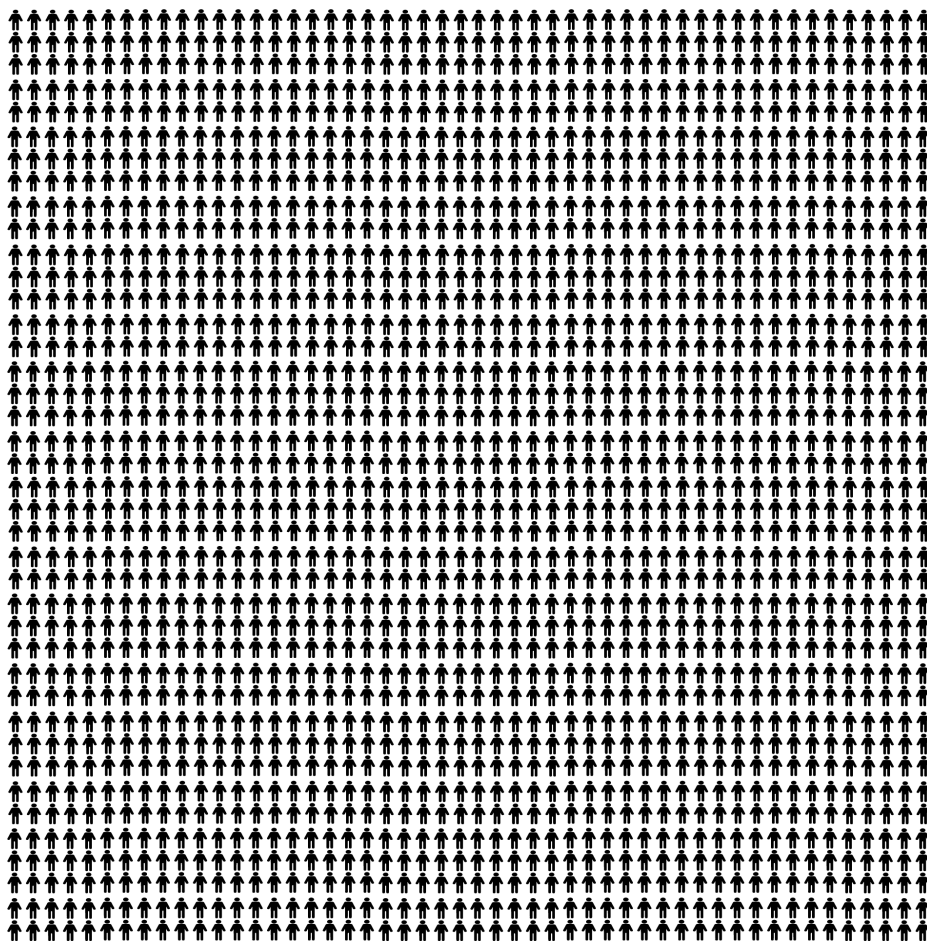
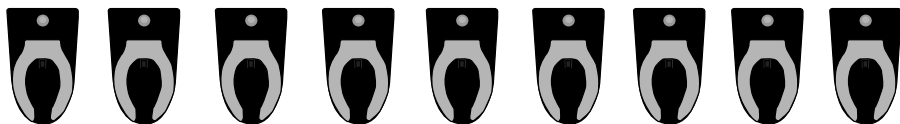
do if they live on the street? Unfortunately public bathrooms are an even rarer occurrence than trash cans. For the 2,000 people who live on the street options are slim.\* Out of the nine public bathrooms operating in Portland, one is open after 7pm. The Portland Loos are often shut down because something went down the pipes that shouldn't have. On top of that the Portland

\*Houseless Count: Tiffany Conklin “2019 Point in Time,” Joint Office of Homeless Services, April 30, 2019.

Loos are mostly unmonitored which puts the people using them at risk.

Imagine a time when you had to use the bathroom really bad - like jumping from one foot to the other and you already tinkled in your pants a little kind of bad. The next public toilet could be miles away, no stores or restaurants will let you use their bathrooms because of the way you look. Where do you go? It's got to come out somehow.

Not unlike the pricey sewer system, cleaning feces off the street is not cheap. Bio-waste cleaning companies charge the city roughly \$70/hour for their services and that's for a good reason - it's rough work. Lance Hamel is the owner of Rapid Response Bio Clean, an organization contracted by the city to clean bio-waste, maintain portable toilets and do camp sweeps. He confirms that ironically the people who hate seeing poop on the street also don't want to see publicly accessible sanitation. Having public bathroom with payed attendants would be cheaper. So what's the issue? Why is that not happening? Sandra Comstock is part of the organization Hygiene for All. The organization is working on a pilot program that will provide monitored sanitation services to the public, a “Hygiene Hub”. I got a chance to talk to her



and Mona Robinson from Sisters of the Road about this. Mona manages the Hygiene Huddle at Sisters and is also involved with Hygiene for All as an Operations Manager.

Here is our conversation:

**Mona: So they have a porta pottie program where they drop of porta potties and we had one that was right across the street for a week but the problem with them is that they don't allow camping within a two block radius. So it doesn't make any sense if it is there for this community to not let them be near it, especially at night. Who wants to walk two blocks if you have to use the restroom in the middle of the night? It's not safe to do**

**“Who wants to walk two blocks if you have to use the restroom in the middle of the night? It's not safe to do that, especially for women to go walking the streets in the middle of the night to go find a bathroom. And half the time they lock them at night anyway, so what's the point of having them?”**

that, especially for women to go walking the streets in the middle of the night to go find a bathroom. And half the time they lock them at night anyway, so what's the point of having them? I think a better idea would be - if they are going to use the porta potties - is to let them be 24 hours a day and not the camping regulations and to open up all the bathrooms that we already have to be 24/7. In our documentation we have nine, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Sandra: No they aren't 24 hours a day, only one of them is 24 hours a day, the rest of them close at 7pm. So there are only nine that are open year round and only one of them is open past 7pm.

Johanna: The Portland Loos aren't open after 7pm?

**Mona: No**

Sandra: No, they are run by the parks. So yes, a city with over half



A Portland Loo, photo by Johanna Oppeck

**“We should have enough public bathrooms to support our residents and transients maintained by the city”**





a million people, with two thousand people living on the streets has nine bathrooms. And then you wonder why people poop on the street.

**Mona: Yeah, I mean there is only four people living in my house and it's hard to get four people in one bathroom. I can't even imagine 2000 people in 9 toilets! And one at night. There is so many places, especially in downtown Portland that have locker rooms because this is a biking community, so a lot of the downtown buildings have shower facilities, have laundry facilities, have extensive bathrooms because their employees ride to work and they come to work all sweaty so they take a shower and then go to work. And they have all of that there for them. And if we could get all of them to open up to the community, even just one day a week, the hygiene problem would be much much less. And if they were doing that we could have the community support that and have attendants to make sure that the facilities wouldn't get trashed. But we can't get anybody. They don't want to let "those people" into the building. And then they all say, "Why don't you get a job? Why don't you go do this?" But then they won't do anything to help them get there. These people can't launder their clothes like everybody else. It's raining outside, they're soaked. Right now the issue with them is that infections run rampant this time of year. Not just colds but skin infections.**

Sandra: Skin lesions that come directly from wet clothes jamming on people's skin. It creates infection, then it gets more infected. People end up losing toes, fingers, legs.

**Mona: Cellulites is common and contagious.**

Sandra: Mrsa. Hepatitis.

**Mona: All of them, the As, the Bs, the Cs. All because of lack of access to hygiene.**

Sandra: And it's a public health issue, not just a houseless folks issue. Moreover, it costs \$70 an hour to have somebody called out to clean up human waste. So you can calculate if they are picking up hundreds of piles of human waste how much money the city is spending, which we could be actually spending on bathrooms that people could use and creating jobs for attendants where people could have a safe place to go to the bathroom. On our YouTube site we have a bunch of people talking about the different kinds of things

# “Where do you expect people are going to shit if there’s nowhere to go?”

different people face in terms of both the safety barriers to using the bathrooms as well as just the pure scarcity of it. And then all the mental health consequences of that and not the mention the physical health consequences.

**Mona: We have a friend who was using one of the Portland Loos. He goes up to use it and there is a person there who was going to clean it and he says, “Hey I just have to pee, is it cool?” And the first guy says, “Yeah go ahead, go in there.” And the second guy comes in and literally drags him out of the Loo. He’s already in the middle of peeing so everything is out and exposed and he drags him out of the Loo in front of people because he wants to clean the Loo, instead of letting him just take three more minutes to finish peeing. So it’s not just the safety of somebody might get hurt going to a Loo, but the people who are cleaning them are causing physical and mental harm to our community because they are on a power trip.**

Sandra: Or you’ve been banned from TriMet for three months for sleeping under the trimet bridge which is an actual story of someone I know. It’s Kafkaesque. Not to mention 10% of the houseless population is swept on a weekly basis. A weekly basis. That means everybody is being swept a couple times every few months. So they lose their dentures, their medication, their identification.

**Mona: All of their survival gear.**

Sandra: So then how much harder does it make it to make a housing appointment, to sign up for stuff, to maintain yourself. Then you are back to zero, you have to figure out how to get all that stuff again, which is a matter of going from place to place and waiting in long lines and being treated like crap. It’s this endless cycle of harm. And all that ends up equaling massive barriers to even to basics of just maintaining your sanity much less getting to your appointments, getting to your parole officer, whatever it is. It’s a massive harm machine that solves nothing. It costs a ridiculous amount of money to clean up after the fact like that and you are just moving people from spot to spot and creating this massive trauma around being displaced like that and dispossessed. And also people live in community out here, you can’t survive without forms of mutual aid. Each time you break up a camp you break up that support network that has to be

reconstructed somehow. You are creating all the stress, and the trauma and the fear and everything else. And then even if you are not being swept you are constantly in fear of going to an appointment and coming back and having all your stuff gone. So it's really just the most bizarre thing without any kind of solution. And each year it just creates more and more of the same and honestly it's the sweeps themselves that often disorganized people and make it harder for them to keep their camps clean. I have friends that were swept three days in a row and I have pictures of how the camp looked prior to that because I would go out on a weekly basis and what it was like after sweep number three when the police made them dump out everything and their shopping carts, because that was stolen property. And then people come by and they're like "Why are these people spread out all over the place in the middle of this cul-de-sac?" Well, because three different companies came plus the police and basically disorganized everything, they're whole lives. So they are just exhausted. Because each time you have to move you usually have to move a fair distance and even that process of getting all your stuff from point A to point B unless it fits on your bag, that means you are going to have somebody on the other end who's going to take care, make sure that your stuff is safe and vice versa. So again it created this huge amount of impossible things to set up in a way that you can do it in a kind of reasonable way. It's a form of torture, honestly.

Johanna: The way I understand it, there is this agreement, the Anderson agreement, where they are supposed to give people 48 hours, or is it 72 hours, before they sweep them.

**Mona: It's supposed to be 10 days to 72 hours.**

Johanna: Are people not getting that notice?

Sandra: So the thing is they don't know when the notice is going to happen. They still have to move to another place, 20-25 blocks away or whatever. So it doesn't solve anything. Yes, you know that within this window, sometime, somebody is going to show up to take your stuff. But there are also a lot of instances in which they can go around that agreement if you are technically blocking this, that or the other thing. I've gone multiple, multiple times to help people pick up their stuff. They end up with other people's things, they don't get their own things. There is no good system, there is no accountability. When you pick it up - and now they have clear bags - but before they would say "Here's your stuff" in a black plastic bag but you have to sign to say you have gotten all your stuff back before you can open it up to see what's in it. If you open the bag and you say "My things are gone." Then what do you do? There is no appeal process and you can't take back the stuff that is there. So then you

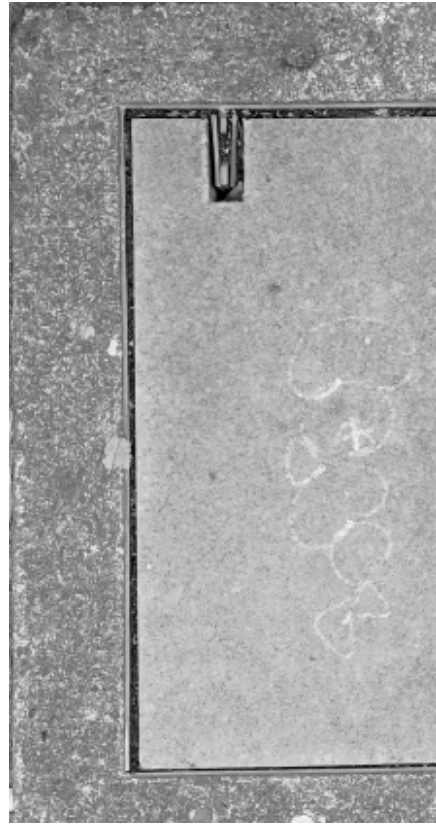
are without all your survival gear and you'd have to hand it back over theoretically and you would have to go through a long Kafkaesque process to hold the city accountable. And those guys, those young people who run those things are just completely not responsible and not very nice. I would often have to call their higher ups to get them to do just the basic courtesy of letting Jack open his bags to see what's in them and to do an inventory check. And even then what can you do? Literally \$5000 para-dentures gone. It's 10 years before he can get a new set from Medicaid. It's absurd.

**Mona: It's crazy.**

Sandra: So with the Hygiene Hub what we are trying to do is to create an alternative system that is actually involves houseless folks in being protagonist and part of the solution in a voluntary way that shows that there is other ways to get trash off the streets and to make sure that Bio-waste makes its way to the right places. And it's going to be less expensive than sending out people in Hazmat suits for 70 bucks and hour. People are like "What are we going to do if we end the sweeps, the trash will pile up on the streets", but there is other ways to handle that. Right now if you live in a house you can have somebody come by and pick up your trash, if you live on the streets there is no legal way to dispose of your household trash. There are trash cans with an opening so big that you can throw a cigarette butt in but that's it. So there is no place to go to the bathroom, there is no legal way to dispose of your trash and those things are completely solvable.

**Mona: And much cheaper.**

Johanna: Thinking about the flush toilet cost of infrastructure alone, it's so insane. All the pipes, the



water filtration and the pumps.

Sandra: That's why we prefer porta potties. If something goes down the porta potties that is not supposed to be there that's solvable. The Loos and up broken for weeks on end.

**Mona: They are expensive.**

Sandra: They are super expensive, they are super difficult to get built and then there is the permitting, the neighborhood ways in and blablabla. Porta potties are



A watercloset in Portland: SW Harvey Milk St & SW Park Ave, photo by Johanna Oppeck

just plopped down.

**Mona:** There are so many regulations around where you can put a Portland Loo. The sidewalk has to be so wide, there can't be any stuff underneath. Which is difficult because in this area there are tunnels. Portland is living on tunnels.

Johanna: I guess my closing question would be, as things are now, in the situation we are in now, what are some steps that everybody could take that would help?

**Mona:** There is a lot of different steps that could be taken. I guess one of the easiest steps would be for the business in Portland to open up their restrooms to the public, without having to get a cup of coffee or buying something. That would be a quick solution.

Sandra: For the daytime hours. For the nighttime hours we would need attended bathrooms. The hub is a pilot. The idea is that we would have one in every

neighborhood. They would also be an emergency preparedness spot.

You need to have places where people can go to the bathroom within a reasonable distance. It's also a both-and-situation - you would also need some of the bucket toilets that you are talking about because old people can't wait that long to go to the bathroom. I know a lot of people who wet their pants because they can't make it to the bathroom. And maybe they are maybe my age or a little bit older but they have incontinence issues. I think you have to a bunch of different kinds of solutions for a bunch of different contexts. You would have to have a pick up strategy. Metro would be maybe picking up those buckets and putting out new ones, they same way that they are doing the bags. Right now the attitude is that people are pooping and peeing and throwing trash on the streets because they want to but the truth of the matter is that they have no choice. So that just shows a big lack of faith in people because most people don't want to be dirty and most people don't want to be looked down upon. Most people want a place where they can go safely and not have it near where they are and all the rest. Nobody wants that. I mean there is a few people who are maybe so out of their gourds but that's a teeny tiny percentage. And I mean the problem is that what we are creating is a massive risk for Hepatitis outbreak, for Mrsa, for anything related to that. And not to mention the trash too, with rats or whatever. We need to be able to provide those services for people just like housed people enjoy. I mean just because you have a house you automatically get all these amenities and yeah it costs money but everybody deserves basic survival kinds of things.

Johanna: It's a human right to have access to sanitation.

Sandra: Yeah, this is about what you need in order for your body to function and to stay alive. That shouldn't be based on how much money you got in your pocket. That's what Hygiene for All is all about, it's trying to reframe our narrative in order to understand that this isn't about a houseless crisis. It is a policy and program generated crisis, created by the fact that we have no equity when it comes to bathrooms and trash. Everybody is like, "What? Nine public bathrooms - how can that be?" Well, yes. How can it be? Exactly how can it be? How is this a thing.

**“Right now the attitude is that people are pooping and peeing and throwing trash on the streets because they want to but the truth of the matter is that they have no choice. So that just shows a big lack of faith in people because most people don’t want to be dirty and most people don’t want to be looked down upon.”**



## Impact Reduction versus Housing and Resources

It is somewhat concerning to read that one of the most frequently asked questions of the “Homelessness Toolkit” website at the Portland.gov website is “Why won’t the police arrest people experiencing homelessness?”\* There is an ongoing tension between efforts to get people housed and direct them to resources and efforts to reduce visibility and felt impact of homelessness to the housed population. Over 50% of all 911 calls are about “unwanted persons,” directing the understaffed Portland Police to intervene in situations where people commit the disorderly action of living in public space. Of course considering how many people in Portland are denied housing and adequate access to sanitation services the impact is becoming bigger. I talked to Jay McIntyre, the business director of Central City Concern’s program Clean and Safe about efforts of impact reduction in downtown Portland.

Johanna: To start off can you tell me about what you do as the Business Director of Clean start at CCC?

Jay: Clean start is a homeless to work social enterprise program which employs formerly homeless individuals who have barriers to employment like homelessness, previous incarceration, addiction, mental health and so forth. So we provide services to a number of business districts in the city of Portland and the city of Gresham to provide street cleaning services. That looks different in downtown in the Clean and Safe business district and the central east side which is the newest enhanced

service district. It looks a little different, we have a lot of people who are on foot with their cleaning cards and they will pick up trash, remove graffiti, clean up the biohazards, all the human waste, animal waste, remove leaves in the winter and needles. Needles are a huge topic around here because we find so many of them staggering. Then we have another set of people who go out in teams of two in a pick-up and they go out to camps, active camps that have been reported to the city and we go out there and take any self-identified garbage or camp-identified garbage, give them garbage bags, potentially offer them some resources. We can’t refer people but our folks have lived experience so they can say, “This is what I did” or “I went here” and kind of give them an informal outreach component. They bring them empty bags and come back at a later date to pick them up. They do an assessment and take before and after pictures and that information then gets send off to the city. And then the final program that is under Clean Start that doesn’t have a cleaning component per se is the day storage area. Underneath the Steel Bridge there is the homeless day storage container, which is a 53 foot old shipping container that has been retrofitted into shelves and a generator so folks can store their property there during the day so it will stay safe and dry and they don’t have to pack it around with them all day long. That makes it a lot easier to find a job or go to a doctor’s appointment or find housing or whatever you need to do without having to push your cart around or carrying everything you own in your bag. That’s a another component of the

\* <https://www.portlandoregon.gov/toolkit/article/562206>



**8.48.050 Toilet Facilities for Industrial Employees.**

Every place of industrial employment shall be provided with adequate toilet facilities which are separate for each sex, except as hereinafter provided. Separate accommodations shall be apart from each other and have their own separate approaches. The one for men shall be clearly marked "MEN" and the one for women shall be clearly marked "WOMEN."

A. Toilet rooms. Toilet rooms shall be readily accessible to employees using them. No toilet facilities shall be more than one floor above or below the regular place of work of the persons using them, unless passenger elevators are available for employee's use in going to and from toilet rooms. Toilet facilities shall be located within 200 feet of all locations at which workers are regularly employed.

The door to every toilet room shall be fitted with an effective self-closing device and screened so that the compartments are not visible from the working room.

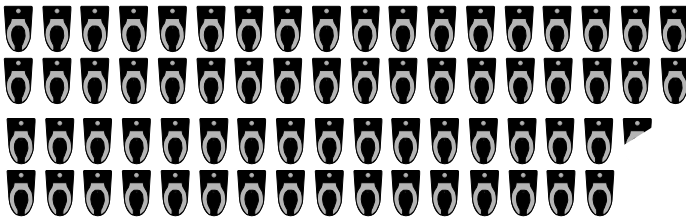
All compartment doors shall be supplied with latch. No toilet room shall open directly into a room where food is prepared, stored, served, manufactured or processed.

B. Water closets and urinals. One water closet shall be deemed adequate when not more than five males and females are required to use the same accommodations. When there are more than a total of five persons, males and females, employed or engaged, separate accommodations for each sex shall be provided according to the following table.

Minimum Number of Persons	Number of Water Closets
8 to 9	1
10 to 24	2
25 to 49	3
50 to 74	4
75 to 100	5
Over 100	1 for each additional 30 persons

*2000*

*68.3 (instead of 9)*



### 14A.50.110 Misuse of a Public Restroom.

- A.** This Section applies to permanent and temporary structures erected or placed for use as a public restroom.
- B.** It is unlawful to stand, climb, sit upon, or lay down on any fixture or floor located inside of or at the entrance of any restroom located in a public building or on public property, unless that fixture or floor is intended to be used for standing, climbing, sitting or lying upon.
- C.** It is unlawful for two or more persons to occupy any restroom that is specifically designed for use by only one person and that is located in a public building or on public property, unless one of those persons is assisting a handicapped person or persons, a child or children under 12 years of age, or an elderly person, or persons in need of assistance.
- D.** It is unlawful to interfere with any attendant in the discharge of his or her duties within any restroom located in a public building or on public property.
- E.** It is unlawful for any male person to enter a restroom marked "Women." This Section does not apply to a male child with his mother or female guardian, or an authorized person in the discharge of his regular duties.
- F.** It is unlawful for any female person to enter a restroom marked "Men." This Section does not apply to a female child with her father or male guardian, or an authorized person in the discharge of her regular duties.
- G.** It is unlawful for any person to engage in disorderly or disruptive conduct inside of or at the entrance to any restroom located in a public building or on public property.
- H.** The above requirements do not excuse a failure to provide reasonable and appropriate accommodations permitting all persons access to restrooms consistent with their expressed gender.



clean start program. I oversee all the work that is done and we have other front line supervisors.

Johanna: If I were an alien coming here from a different planet and I happened to speak English, what would you tell me about the sanitation issues we face in Portland?

Jay: Well, that we have a large houseless population in the city and there are not enough restrooms for them to use in any part of the city. Downtown is probably the best but really in any part of the city there is not enough restrooms. When people have to go they have to go and sometimes they don't care but sometimes it's an immediate need and if there is not a bathroom there they are going to go wherever it is. There is this issue with bio-waste and so forth on the sidewalks and near the streets so what our role is we really try to get it up as quick as possible. We don't want it to sit there very long. We don't want it to be there at all so we try to get it cleaned up within 30 minutes of finding out. If we get a phone call reporting it then we'll have somebody there within a half our to clean it up. So what I would tell you about the sanitation is that yes there is some sanitation issues in this city. We do our best to address all those as quick as possible and make it not an issue. There is obviously too much for us to get all the time but we work diligently to get that all cleaned up as quick as possible. I don't no what else I'd tell you, if you were an alien I'd be all like "WOW!" I'd probably

be shocked.

Johanna: I guess as the alien I am I would probably also ask the question, "Why aren't there enough toilets?"

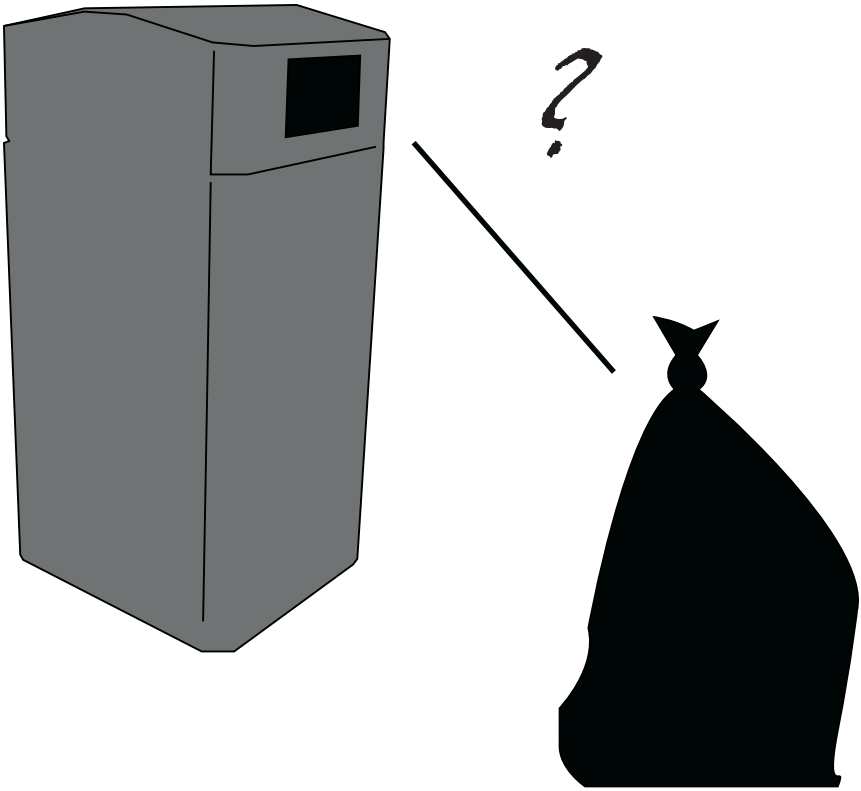
Jay: That comes down to a city thing. They have a lot of Loos down here and they are really expensive. I think they cost a quarter million dollars a piece just to install. So I think that's a financial piece, but I mean we gotta find another way to open up restrooms for people. Most business or private people aren't going to pay for a bathroom, so it's really on the city to provide enough restrooms. It's a basic need for the people of the city. Hopefully they can increase the amount soon.

Johanna: Do you think it is more of a city, administrative issue or more of a public perception issue that there aren't as many public bathrooms?

Jay: It is probably more of a public perception issue. There are a lot of bathrooms-notenough. Unfortunately a lot of the times people won't walk two blocks to use the bathroom when they are houseless and they don't have any hope and that's a bigger issue in itself. If people are willing to walk a little ways to use the bathroom there is probably plenty, actually no, there is still not enough.

Johanna: What would you like to say to the average Portlander who feels inconvenienced by the impact of houselessness?

Jay: That's always the tough one.



My first instinct is to be all “I understand your frustration.” There is not much we can do about it. It’s a systemic problem. And depending on the impact, yes it might be an impact to you but there are people sleeping outside who don’t have anywhere to go to the bathroom or take a shower. And once you are sleeping outside and you can’t take a shower how are you even supposed to look for a job? Nobody’s going to hire you. So how do you get out of the situation you are in? Long story short, I would just say, “Please try to have a little more compassion.” If

there are behaviors that are against the law going along with these campsites that’s a whole other thing. There are a lot of criminal behaviors that go along with campsites sometimes. But if that’s not going on then I would say, “Please try to have a little compassion with the person sleeping in the tent when it’s 32 degrees outside” Probably not what everybody wants to hear and maybe if they are tired of the issue they can volunteer to be a solution to the issue instead of just complaining about what isn’t right. It’s tough because I don’t have people

who are camping out in front of my house right now. So I am not in the same shoes as the people who have people camping right across the street and who don't feel safe. So I mean that's a whole different conversation. I get that. So maybe my perspective is a little bit biased because I haven't had to deal with people sleeping out around my house before.

Johanna: Those were the questions I had prepared, but I am also interested in talking about needles. Would providing more needle disposal units help - or are people not going to use them?

Jay: I was in the same thought process probably six months ago. They were talking about putting in those needle drop boxes for a long time and finally got them four or five months ago. So there are four downtown that we now service one is right in front of Bud Clark Commons and then there is another one by the Loo on 5th and Glisan and then there is another one on 4th and Davis and another one by the food stamp office. I wasn't sure if they would get utilized either but they are. Every month we find a couple thousand in there and we don't always count all of them because a lot of other stuff gets thrown in those bins as well. We just pull out the trash and there is a huge sharps bin we change once it's full. So I was actually shocked - happily shocked - how much they were actually being used. And again you go back to the bathroom issue where a lot of people won't walk a couple blocks to do the right thing or be responsible. It's the same in this case too. We find so

many needles. If you go back to 2012 just in the 213 blocks in Downtown Portland, which is the Clean and Safe district. In 2012 it was under 3000 needles that we found in the entire year in the downtown area and then the next year it was like 5000 and then the next year it was like 8000 and this last year it was 44000. Just in the 213 blocks of downtown Portland - in a year, which is just insane. It does include a couple month with those needle drop boxes but really it's just a huge amount - a huge amount of needles. In camps I think there were over 60000 that we took out. A lot of the sharps containers we pick up are from Multnomah county so I know that they give out sharps containers and so forth. That's fantastic, that helps. It is a lot easier if they have a sharps container to put it in there. You see a lot of people with sharps containers - I know that people are getting them. From that standpoint at least when people are being responsible, there isn't that much of an impact on the community. If they are willing to do that, chances are they are probably going to be responsible in other aspects of their life too. The needle situation is just huge. It's really skyrocketed. A lot of times we'll find hundreds in one spot sometimes even thousands at some of the campsites. Sometimes we'll find 100, 200, 300, 400 needles just cleaning up one area in downtown. Usually it's abandoned campsites. You know it's a real issue in Portland, it's been on our radar for a long

**“They want to support it but you know nimbyism is big, they don’t want it next to them. People don’t want a shelter next to them because they think it’s going to attract all the negative stuff. A lot of it is fear, I think people get scared of people that are hanging out in front of their businesses.”**

time, tracking it, trying to get more services, more cleaners out on the street to pick this stuff up, more sharps containers are helpful. We also have one at the day storage container, so that's there. There's five and then they are supposed to have them at all the fire stations too and I don't know how well that would work but that's an idea too. I think the needles are so huge. When people see needles on the ground it puts fear in them a lot of times. It makes it feel like a completely unsafe location, no matter where you are, if you find a needle on the ground. I would think most people would feel that way. That goes along with when there is trash on the ground and it's dirty people don't feel safe either. They kind of go hand in hand. Luckily this last year was the smallest increase from the year prior that we've had for many many years. Two years ago it was 37,000, this year I think it was 44,000 so it's still a little bit of a gap but it wasn't huge. So hopefully it's starting to plateau off or those containers or dropboxes are actually working and we are finding less on the street. We'll have to wait and see. I am hopeful that we won't continue to grow exponentially with the amount of needles that we find.

Johanna: Do you think more needle exchange programs would help with that?

Jay: Absolutely. Especially when you can swap one for one. Most people will use that option. I know they will give you a couple if you don't bring any and I think it's like two or three. If you can exchange your hundred needles and get a hundred back I think a lot of people do do that. I know that there is a huge impact from needle exchange. I can't even imagine how many needles we'd find if they didn't do the needle exchanges throughout the city. I'm sure they probably bring in hundreds of thousands

needles a year so I'm sure our numbers would sky rocket if that service wasn't available for folks. I know in some places they are kind of controversial but they save people's lives.

Johanna: I asked you that question before when I asked what you would say to Portlanders who feel inconvenienced by the impact of homelessness. But also what are some solutions for this hypocrisy? So many Portlanders feel like they are liberal, progressive, they are compassionate, they are all about social justice and diversity but then there is no willingness to make a sacrifice for these values.

Jay: Absolutely. They want to support it but you know nimbysism is big, they don't want it next to them. People don't want a shelter next to them because they think it's going to attract all the negative stuff. A lot of it is fear, I think people get scared of people that are hanging out in front of their businesses. And I don't know the exact number but I know close to 50% of the 911 calls in Portland where for "unwanted individuals" outside of businesses and houses, which basically equates to homeless people outside, which I think says a lot to the amount of fear people have. Instead of maybe walking outside and being a human being and talking to them and sometimes that goes well and sometimes it doesn't but I feel like you should start there. It's tough. There is a lot of people that are severely mentally ill and there is nothing anybody can do about it because that's just how the system is set up. But yeah, again, I think I would tell those folks that there is no reason to be scared or fear people just because they don't have a house as long as there is not the criminal behavior going along with it. People just hanging out are not a threat to people a majority of the time, they just want a place to call home or a place to be in their

own little world where nobody bothers them just like anybody else does when they shut the front door to their house. These folks don't have that opportunity. You basically have to do everything in public. There is literally no privacy when you are homeless. Those are the things you take for granted that we do inside four walls because it's in our house and it's private but it might not be acceptable out on the street. And they don't have that option to have a private location to live at and call home. That can be challenging too.

Johanna: There is this porta potty right now by the Pendelton building in China Town across the street from Sisters of the Road. It was there before but then it got taken away because there was a no-camping ordinance that came along with it and people weren't following it and now it's back again. It seems like the problem is that the camping poses a financial threat to some of the businesses. So they don't want people hanging out because they are concerned about people being afraid and not coming in. What should we do to mitigate that fear - just talk to people?

Jay: Yeah, that's the best thing I can come up with. I mean I don't think there is any one way to mitigate that issue. Different individuals can have different needs, a different history and trauma, so I don't think there is a one size fits all plan so to speak. I don't think there is going to be one thing that will do, I think it's going to be different for everybody. There will probably be some similarity. With businesses it's tough. I mean I hear it a lot from Clean and Safe. Lots of businesses are leaving downtown because of the issues around that. I understand that and that would probably be a bigger challenge than going out and saying "Hey, how are you guys doing? I'd

appreciate it if you wouldn't camp right here." Type thing. I don't think that necessarily would always work in that situation but I think it's worth a shot - always. People that are houseless aren't necessarily treated like they are human beings by a lot of folks so if you're just real and you treat them like anybody else with respect and courtesy a lot of times you are just going to get that back because they just want respect to a majority of the time, start a relationship with them. Maybe those people can help the people that are sitting out in front of their business, maybe they just need something or rather in their life and they are able to help them out instead of calling the police on them because I don't think that is going to solve anything ever in this sort of situation. I am glad the city is starting to take a different approach to that, sending a social worker or a mental health worker to that type of situation instead of an officer so hopefully that will help a little bit.

Johanna: To end, is there anything you'd like to add that you think would be valuable for people to know?

Jay: So last year just in the downtown area it was 70,000 bags of trash 55,473 clean ups of what we call "special attention", which would be feces, urine, vomit and blood, so over 50,000 clean ups of those lovely substances. 177,000 bags of trash and 111,000 needles we clean up last year in total, across all the different departments. Part of the trash that gets picked up from the camps and taken to the dump actually gets weighed and I know with those it was like 2 million pounds of trash last year. Just an astronomical





Communicating in Portland: W Burnside St & NW 9th Ave, photo by Johanna Oppeck

number. Lot's to do out there. Lot's to keep up on, trying to help the sanitation of the city. I really don't want what happened in San Diego to happen down here, where they had B break out on the street due to lack of the cleaning of the city and human feces. So let's not. I don't want that to happen here, that would just be awful. We are really trying to keep up on it as best we can.

Johanna: Do you think it would be cheaper to have people be housed than to have all that effort of cleaning the streets?

Jay: I do. Absolutely. It's cheaper in many aspects. It's cheaper for the city, the taxpayers, emergency room - people are going to be in the emergency room less often if they are housed I absolutely think it would be a lot

cheaper. The initial cost of getting the housing is the problem. There is lots of construction going on in the city but how much of it is low income or affordable housing. Probably very little which is unfortunate. All it's doing is just driving up the rent prices. And then people are going to come in and pay that rent and it's just making a bigger gap between the middle class and poor.

## A Disaster - not a Crisis

As an activist and somebody who has experience going through the shelter and affordable housing system, Jennifer Langston knows that the situation in Portland is a dire. In our conversation she told me about her experiences and perspectives.

Johanna: What got you involved in advocacy for the houseless?

Jennifer: I actually got into advocacy for the houseless because I was going around Portland taking pictures of us littering on our streets. And I was harassing companies to teach them how to be better about their packaging and I noticed that there is all these homeless people on the street. I grew up in Portland. Growing up there was like a man, or a line of man, there's a bunch of men on the streets but I never saw women or children on the street. You didn't see tents. You didn't see all of this. My dad was a police officer so I asked him, "Is this normal? Did I just not pay attention?" And what he said to me is that he had never seen anything like this.

So I started getting into it through photography and when I got shot April 1st, 2014, I ended up in a shelter running from that experience. It took me only a couple months to get out of the shelter, but it took me four years to get back on my feet. And through that I started getting into mentoring and started working in shelters and working with people to get back on their feet. Trying to show them, "Hey I did

it," so after this there are people there to help you find another way out of this. Then I started to do public speaking at different events telling my story and trying to explain what homelessness. Not what I used to think what homelessness was, like, "You are a drug addict, you don't want to work," so just like everybody else I had my own idea of what homelessness really was. And I started to realize, "Oh my god these are people that can't afford their rent and that's it." They lost their job and then lost their place to live. So I decided that I needed to start sharing the experiences I've seen doing photography and talking to people on the street and living in the shelter myself and then going back as a mentor. I needed to share that experience with people so they understand that it's not a matter of "Oh you are homeless so you need to find a job and find a place to live." I grew up here and I can't afford to live here anymore.

I would say the one thing that I've been saying in my public speaking is that people who are not experiencing homelessness call this a crisis and people who are living this experience now that it's a disaster. Anybody could be experiencing homelessness, not just through drugs and alcohol. The idea that we aren't taking care of the citizens, our neighbors, doing projects like you are doing delivering the buckets - it floors me. I know that Central City Concern

was bringing out the garbage bags to people living under the Broadway bridge and then they would pick up the garbage bags and people under the bridge got swept and Central City Concern was no longer providing that service and people had moved on so I'm sure that there was some mess being created unfortunately.

Johanna: Why do you think people are so resistant to helping out people on the street?

Jennifer: I think about this all the time because I had a conversation with my father who is a retired police officer about homelessness. And he said to me one time, "If we stop feeding them they will go away." And I said, "Wow, Dad. These are people that may have grown up without a parent caring whether they had a meal, whether they had a roof over their head or weren't sent to school and they are our neighbors." I think people dehumanize people who are homeless. I've noticed that when there is somebody who is in a wheelchair, they are not disabled, people see them only as homeless. I think that's one of the problems. I think that we live in a society that says, "Pull yourself up by the bootstraps, figure it out." And so that's another issue. And I think there is this fear of the unknown. Not knowing who these people are, not having a conversation with these people and trying to understand. I will say the Bonded Here Together coalition that I'm on for the ballot measure is that we have the Portland business alliance on board with us. I think that more people are

## **“Their story is my story and my story is their story. Our story is your story”**

waking up and know that we have to do something about this. It's in every neighborhood, it's at every storefront and everybody's affected by it. I think that people look at the houseless community as the enemy and instead of seeing them as the enemy they are going to start to see them as neighbors and human beings. That's the only thing I can think of is that people are just dehumanizing people who just live on the streets, just trying to survive on the streets.

Johanna: Right. And it's so irrational.

Jennifer: It is! Sometimes I think, "Are you just afraid that you are gonna catch that? Do you see yourself in that person?" I wonder about that because one of the things that I always say is that the only difference between a housed person and an unhoused person is that a housed person can hide all of their issues. Their alcoholism, they are shopaholics, or whatever it is that they are suffering with. For people living on the streets, all their issues are exposed for everybody to see. It's like they are on stage for us to watch. And so I wonder sometimes if people are fearful because they see themselves in the homeless. But that's just me figuring out why people hate so much, why they can't understand



another human being's pain and sorrow. A lot of people don't understand that nobody teaches you to be homeless. Say you get homeless, not everybody knows what to do to get themselves out of homelessness. So sometimes you just need to talk to the person that's bothering you, as the store owners would say, to find out what's going on. Find out what the numbers are for the services to access help. Just have a little card with a bunch of numbers on it - businesses should know that. So that if they are having problems to not just call the police.

Johanna: Can you tell me more about Here Together, and the ballot measure?

Jennifer: So the ballot measure is what's happening in three counties coming together and deciding that we need money for the services. So in the shelters our case managers that are working with the people are overworked, we don't have wrap around services to so when people get into their housing, people don't realize that some people need more services so they can keep that housing. There is a housing bond made and so we'll help people get wrap around services once they get into their apartments. It's a high earns tax, if you don't make over 125,000 as a single person or over 250,000 if you are couple then you won't feel the effect of it. And then there is a tax attached to it for businesses that make over five million a year. So the point of that measure is instead of taking the people who are experiencing homelessness or who are going to experience homelessness and giving them that burden, we are going to put the burden on the people who are not facing or experiencing

homelessness. As a mentor I want there to be more mentors paid and trained in all areas. So that's one of my agendas in this, to start getting mentors paid and trained, because what I do is volunteer, there is not just a job for a mentor within Transition Projects. And I will tell you one of the fastest ways that people become homeless again is that they get their apartment and then they have their friends move in from the streets and then they end up getting evicted because there are laws in the lease that say you can't have people staying over 10 days. On the street into housing - there is still community and it's hard to let that go. But it also can cause some more homelessness. I have met people that returned to homelessness because they were so lonely and isolated. And it is only in the last couple of years that they started to allow couples in shelters. So imagine if you and your husband were on the street and then you couldn't be in a shelter together. Some people don't go into the shelter because they don't want to be separated from their loved ones. There is that support network, that protection that you guys offer each other.

# Alchemy Buckets

Urban Alchemy started on the premise that transformation is possible. Transforming your fears and preconceptions into something valuable. Turning lead into gold is not unlike turning fear and paralysis to compassion and action. In *Les Miserables* Victor Hugo described the sewer as the conscience of the city, a place of all secrets yet also a place where there are no secrets. The thing left to do now, is to bring the sewer above ground and to see

poop as the gold it has been all along. Rapid Response Bio Clean has been collaborating with me in a mission to show this transformation. In an ongoing effort, my friends and fellow artists Armin Radford, Scott King and I distributed 20 golden 5 gallon buckets with an attached toilet seat to campsites throughout Portland. Those buckets come with dry composting material, instructions, a ‘safe poop kit’ and a number to call for pick up by Rapid Response. Individual toilet



Armin Radford and Johanna Oppeck prepping Alchemy Buckets, photo by Shane Schoolman



Distributing Alchemy Buckets, photo by Scott King

units, contained and concentrated - away from the sewer system.

It's cheap, it's environmentally friendly and it would be doable on a larger scale. Why clean up biowaste off the street if buckets full of future fertilizer could be picked up and reused?



# Resources

## **Find out more about Sewers and Public Toilets:**

-PHLUSH (Public Hygiene Let us stay Human), [phlush.org](http://phlush.org)

## **Find out more about Houselessness in Portland:**

-Homeless Research and Action Collaborative, [pdx.edu/homelessness-collaborative](http://pdx.edu/homelessness-collaborative)

-Street Roots, [streetroots.org](http://streetroots.org)

## **Want to take action? Check out these organizations and get involved.**

-Hygiene 4All, [h4apdx.org](http://h4apdx.org)

-Ground Score Association, [groundscore@trashforpeace.org](mailto:groundscore@trashforpeace.org)

-Right2Survive, [right2survive.org](http://right2survive.org)

-Sisters of the Road, [sistersoftheroad.org](http://sistersoftheroad.org)

-Central City Concern, [centralcityconcern.org](http://centralcityconcern.org)

-Outside In, [outsidein.org](http://outsidein.org)

-PHLUSH, [phlush.org](http://phlush.org)

## **Other actions to take:**

- advocate for socially just and environmentally friendly sanitation at your local neighborhood association

-befriend your neighbors on the street, say hi, ask how they are doing

-get a composting toilet, it's easy

-use and revive public space independent from going to work/school/consumption (have a picnic, play guitar on the street, hang out with your friends and family, play cards/chess/basketball/soccer/hide and seek - options are endless)

-buy an issue of Streetroots and talk to the vendor



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# Addendum: Augustin and the Plague Pit

In 1679 Vienna was hit by a plague transmitted by rat-travelling fleas. This devastating event produced the myth of an unlikely hero: Marx Augustin. Augustin was a homeless storyteller, comedian, poet and musician. One night he had a few drinks and fell asleep on the streets of Vienna. Presumed to have died from the infection, he was thrown into a plague pit. The next day, by some miracle he climbed out of the pit - perfectly healthy. Augustin, so goes the story, went on and performed comedy songs for many years after his encounter with the pit. In 1907 there was a bronze memorial built to his honor on top of the presumed plague pit. Sometimes Augustin's story is often interpreted as a story of a lucky fool, it can also be seen as a story of resilience and perseverance.

Since Covid-19 has officially arrived in Portland and most other US-American cities, social distancing policies "sheltered" people in place. "Stay home, stay healthy" is the message. Complying with

the new distancing guidelines, shelters and resource centers for those experiencing homelessness have not been able to serve as many people as they used to. Coffee shops and other businesses where people used to be able to use the bathroom and wash their hands are closed. While most of us are struggling to find toilet paper, many can't find a toilet. Containing and reducing the spread of the virus in Portland will be difficult when 2,000 people live on the streets with no access to proper hygiene. In response, the city is now putting together more emergency shelters and publicly accessible porta potties. Camp sweeps have temporarily stopped. Meanwhile unemployment rates are skyrocketing and though for now people cannot be evicted from their residences many face the threat of becoming homeless.

As Covid-19 is crumbling established economic structures, people with means now have a choice: hoard and self-preserve or share and work together. As awful as the situation is, it could be an opportunity to understand where



1908 Marx Augustin Memorial

our public health and hygiene systems are failing and give us a chance to change them.

Augustin's story did not end with his memorial. The bronze statue was destroyed during WWII. In response, an anonymous person inscribed the remains of the memorial, "I escaped the black plague, I was taken by the brown plague," putting out

the idea that a virus may not be as dangerous as politics. Augustin and his habit of stubborn survival provoked the creation of another memorial in the early 1950s. The inscription now says, "I was broken, now you have me again and you listen to my songs."

