



People for Fairness Coalition

DOWNTOWN DC  
Public Restroom Initiative

## ***REVISITING, ONE YEAR LATER, PRIVATE FACILITIES IN DC THAT LET US USE THEIR RESTROOMS***

*January, 2017*

*Design, Data Collection, Analysis and Report prepared by the People for Fairness Coalition (PFC) Downtown Washington DC Public Restroom Committee <sup>1</sup>*

### ***BACKGROUND***

People for Fairness Coalition (PFFC), was founded by individuals who are experiencing or have experienced housing instability. It's objective to ensure that DC residents experiencing housing instability have access to affordable housing through advocacy, outreach, and peer mentoring.

PFFC's Downtown Washington DC Public Restroom Initiative is one of PFFC's four Initiatives (for more information go to [www.pffcdc.org](http://www.pffcdc.org)). Started in the fall of 2014, the goal is to convince the DC government to install and maintain clean, safe, public restrooms available to everyone in needed areas of downtown DC.

Before formally launching our Initiative we decided that it was necessary to document whether or not there is a problem. We designed a checklist, selected five areas that met two criteria: (1) high level of pedestrian traffic; and (2) an appreciable level of individuals lacking stable housing. We visited 85 private facilities with restrooms in each area -- Gallery Place, Georgetown, Dupont Circle, K St Corridor and Columbia Heights. Our first step was to find out if we if were allowed in without purchasing anything. If allowed in we entered the restroom(s) to determine whether they were clean and safe. We also recorded the hours the facility was open.

We also carried out an online review, complemented by visits, in order to identify public restrooms both open during the day as well as 24/7.

### ***RESTROOM INVENTORY FINDINGS***

- Half of the 85 restrooms that we visited in private facilities limited restroom access to customers only; many had locks and combinations on their restroom doors.
- We found a total five public restrooms open during the day; two near the White House and two near Gallery Place. Four of the five are open for limited hours.
- There are only three public restrooms open 24/7 in all of Washington DC: Union Station, the Jefferson Memorial and the Lincoln Memorial. If you are near Gallery Place you have a half-

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Everett, member of the PFFC Downtown Washington DC Public Restroom Initiative, prepared the design, data gathering, data analysis, and preparation of the outline of the write-up. Marcia Bernbaum, mentor and advisor to the PFFC Public Restroom Committee provided support and guidance.

mile walk to get to Union Station. If at any of the other four locations and you have to go urgently in the early hours of the morning, you will have to walk between a mile and 3 miles.

## ***RESTROOM INVENTORY FOLLOW UP A YEAR LATER***

While tabulating the inventory we realized that we had not collected information on how individuals who lack stable housing are treated when they try to use a restroom in a private facility.

To this end, one year later, between November 2015 and February 2016, we designed and carried out a follow up to the restroom inventory. The follow up had two objectives: (1) find out how an individual who looked like he lacked stable housing was treated when he tried to enter the 42 restrooms that we were able to enter a year before; and (2) find out if any of the 42 restrooms, previously available to individuals who were not customers, had subsequently limited access to customers only.

To accomplish the first objective we formed a pair: one of us looked like we were housing unstable: a large tattered jacket, a sock hat, loose slacks. When he walked he looked down and had an uneven gait. The other was dressed in nice clothing. We took turns entering each facility, one went to the receptionist or someone behind the counter and asked if s/he could use the restroom while the other observed how the individual was treated – both in terms of how s/he were spoken to as well as the person's body language. We also observed the body language of customers.

## ***NUMERICAL FINDINGS***

- All 42 facilities provided entry to their restrooms to the member of our pair who was dressed nicely.
- 4 facilities restricted entry to the member of our pair who had the appearance of being housing unstable.
- 10 of the 42 open to the public a year before had put locks or combinations on their doors; reducing restroom access among the 85 restaurants visited from 50% in 2015 to 38% in 2016.

## ***QUALITATIVE OBSERVATIONS***

Two instances where the person who was housing unstable was given restroom access but denied the code to the combination on the restroom door:

- In both instances the person who dressed normally was given the combination. By way of contrast, the individual who looked housing unstable was not given the combination. Instead a restaurant employee accompanied him to the restroom and opened the door.

Four instances when employees working in the same restaurant treated the person who looked housing unstable differently:

- At one facility, the person at the counter motioned to the person who looked housing unstable to come in. Another employee of the same facility then blocked him.
- We visited one high-end restaurant twice. The male receptionist to the restroom denied the person that looked housing unstable entry on the first visit. On the second visit the female receptionist waved him in.
- At another high end restaurant the receptionist hesitated. Another employee, who was observing, whispered into the receptionist's ear and resulting in his being denied entry. When he pressed the receptionist she indicated that her boss was on the floor and she feared for her job.
- The person who looked housing unstable was not let in until the other person who was dressed normally went in. Seeing that we were together one of the employees had a discussion with the employee that denied entry. The individual who was housing unstable was let in but was not given the combination to the restroom

### Two instances when both of us were permitted to use the restroom but were treated differently

- In one instance the person dressed nicely was sent to unisex restroom on first floor of the restaurant while the person who looked housing unstable was sent upstairs to the men's restroom in a room with empty tables.
- In another instance the male employee behind the cash register gave precise instructions to the individual dressed nicely on how to get to the restroom. When the person who looked unhoused approached him he waved him over in the direction of the restroom without giving instructions on how to get there.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

1. Private facilities are increasingly limiting access to customers in commercial areas of downtown DC that have a high level of pedestrian traffic and a large number of individuals who lack stable housing.
  - In carrying out the follow up study in early 2016 we found that 10 of the 42 facilities that in early 2015 did not limit restroom access to customers had put locks or combinations on the doors.
  - Were we to visit these same facilities one year later, in early 2017, we believe that even more will have put locks or combinations on their doors.
2. There is clearly discrimination: Whether or not you are let in depends on the judgment of the restaurant staff member on duty. How you are treated, even if given access to the restroom, also depends on the restaurant staff member on duty

We end with a caveat: Had the individual who played the role of someone who is housing unstable looked more disheveled, been pushing a cart, and/or or carried a plastic bag, it is possible that more restaurants would have denied this person entry to their restrooms.