



Testimony of Ashley Gorczyca, Advocacy Specialist, Miriam's Kitchen

In support of B22-0223, the Public Restroom Facilities Installation and Promotion Act of 2017

Before the Committee of Transportation and the Environment

January 10, 2017

Good morning, Chairperson Cheh and members of the Committee. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify before you today. My name is Ashley Gorczyca and I am an advocacy specialist at Miriam's Kitchen, located in the Foggy Bottom neighborhood of Ward 2. Miriam's Kitchen works to end chronic homelessness through advocacy, case management, art therapy, meals, housing, and outreach. We convene The Way Home Campaign, a coalition of over 95 organizations and 5,000 individuals dedicated to ending chronic homelessness in the District of Columbia.

I'd first like to begin by commending People for Fairness Coalition (PFC) for their leadership on this issue. Miriam's Kitchen has been a proud supporter and partner of PFC over the past ten years. We admire their advocacy and leadership in addressing barriers that prevent people from moving into housing. It is because of their expertise, leadership, dedication, and research that this issue is brought before you today.

Access to a public restroom is a basic human right

Today, you've heard stories from a number of individuals who have had difficulties accessing a public restroom when they needed one, and the humiliation and shame they experienced during this vulnerable time. No one should have to go through this.

Like housing, having access to a restroom that is clean, safe, and secure is a basic human right. Every person, every day requires the use of a restroom to ensure their health and well-being. No matter where someone is – at home, work, school, a park, the doctor's office – they should

be able to find a toilet nearby, no questions asked. Unfortunately, in DC, this is not the case. We have heard from residents and tourists alike – finding a public restroom in DC is much more difficult than it should be. While this may seem like a trivial issue to some, it’s actually a much larger problem for others, including children, seniors, individuals with chronic illnesses, and people who are pregnant. It’s especially troublesome for people who are experiencing homelessness.

Accessible public restrooms reduce barriers to housing and discrimination

Public restrooms are often out of reach for our District’s most vulnerable residents. In addition to the severe lack of toilets accessible near public spaces, many businesses deny people from using their bathrooms based on how they look, smell, or whether they’re able to purchase something. The hoops people must jump through to simply use a toilet are disgraceful and discriminatory. Due to these restrictions, people are often forced to either soil themselves or relieve themselves in a public space, the latter sometimes resulting in a citation or fine. This is unacceptable.

In the nation’s capital, over 7,400 people are denied the dignity of sleeping in their own bed each night.¹ And as hard as people try, finding an affordable apartment to exit this situation is challenging. But when you add the lack of access to resources that would improve your health and hygiene, finding a job or an apartment becomes near impossible. Investing in public restrooms allow people to live with dignity and provide people with a better opportunity to move into housing and thrive.

Recommendations

Miriam’s Kitchen supports the passage of Bill B-22-223. We feel this is a necessary step in making public restrooms accessible for all, especially for people experiencing homelessness.

1. United States, Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Community Planning and Development, *The 2017 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress*, 2017, Washington, D.C.

We urge the “Working group” described in this legislation to be made up of a diverse group of stakeholders. This includes people of various income levels, individuals with lived experience of homelessness, and people who specialize in the tourism, health, and urban planning industries. A broad group of constituents is best equipped to advise the District where public restrooms should be located and how they can best serve all DC residents and visitors.

In addition to investing in public restrooms, we urge this committee and the DC Council to invest in a centralized space where individuals experiencing homelessness can go during the day. Most shelters do not operate during the day, and with the temporary closing of the MLK Library, many individuals have been left without a safe place to go. By investing in a downtown services center, people would be able to connect to health and housing services and access resources – such as showers, laundry facilities, mail service, and computers – that can speed up the housing process.

A few weeks ago, we memorialized 45 individuals who passed away in the District without the dignity of a home. I think all of us share the same concern – this should not be happening, especially in the nation’s capital. We can change that. When we lift the barriers that have been placed on people for so long – barriers that prevent people from finding safe and stable housing – we provide an opportunity for people to thrive. And when this happens, we all win.

Thank you again for giving me the opportunity to speak before you today. I’m happy to answer any questions you may have.

