

Human Nature

Summary outcomes of a
City of Portland-funded project
to support access to hygiene
and work opportunities
through a Trauma Informed
Care approach

executive summary highlights

1

COVID-19 has placed severe constraints on access to hygiene services for people experiencing homelessness

2

Engaging trusted people with lived experience with homelessness has been key to the success of this pilot

3

Summary of pilot outcomes:

- 1 Hygiene Center, including a disability affirmative and dignified bathroom and hub for free hygiene and PPE, including hand sanitizer, facemasks, tooth paste, deodorant, feminine hygiene supplies, socks, underwear, hand warmers and razors made accessible to 2000 individuals and almost 50 families over the past 29 weeks the station has been open.
- 1 Seattle model handwashing station
- 25 WRAP-style hand washing stations at encampments in greenspaces across the city

4

Open communication and relationship building with all neighbors has helped maintain positive support for hygiene center

5

Multifunctional approaches (handwashing station + native plantings) may broaden interest among groups supporting these spaces

Acknowledgements

We want to thank community partners and organizers who have made all iterations of the Human Nature and Hygiene Station projects possible including, but not limited to, The Western Regional Advocacy Project (WRAP), Right 2 Survive, the Social Justice Action Center (SJAC), Sisters of the Road, Trauma Informed Oregon (TIO), Friends of Trees, Keys, Beats, Bars, Northwest Alliance for Alternative Media and Education and Reclaim, Remain, Rebuild The Stop the Sweeps Coalition, The Rosehip Medic Collective, Daniel Rushton, Derek Leitch and Shilo George of lush Kumtux Tumtum Consulting. We also thank our funder, the City of Portland.

We also acknowledge the Indigenous people whose traditional and ancestral homelands this project operates on. We honor the Multnomah, Kathlamet, Clackamas, Tumwater, Watlala bands of the Chinook, the Tualatin Kalapuya, and many other Indigenous nations of the Columbia River. We pay our respect to the elders, both past and present, who have stewarded this land throughout generations.

“Folks understand that not having access to running water, not being able to wash yourself, or wash your hands, it’s a public safety and a public health issue, which is arguably the most important part of this. But a close second, if not equally important is the fact that it ties you to your community.”

-Hand Washing Station Steward

Backstory of the Human Nature Pilot

The intersecting environmental, housing and public health crises facing Portland have undermined the fabric of who we are as Portlanders and what we value about our City- from our vibrant greenspaces, to our empathetic support for vulnerable community members, to our neighborhood spirit of cohesion. Our city is witnessing increasingly negative public attitudes towards people experiencing homelessness. The visibility of waste in natural areas is exacerbating tensions, increasing the isolation and dehumanization of unhoused people in our community. Natural resource agencies are being told to direct critical conservation resources towards clean ups and evictions. Hygiene facilities for the unhoused are shuttered when they are needed most, as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to rage through our community.

These conditions did not arise overnight, and the impacts of income inequality and the housing crisis have become unignorable for our city. These issues began to intersect with the work of Bonneville Environmental Foundation (BEF) as natural resource partners working in urban greenspaces began reporting they were experiencing a new challenge- more and more people were attempting to live and survive in the natural areas that they were trying to conserve.

In order to improve outcomes of interactions between environmental workers and the unhoused community, BEF partnered with Trauma Informed Oregon (TIO) to offer training in Trauma Informed Care to natural resource agencies and managers. These trainings sought to provide tools for understanding trauma, de-escalation and ultimately aimed to decrease the criminalization of those living in our city's urban greenspaces. The program trained over 500 interested natural resources professionals in Trauma Informed Care, driving home the extent and impact of the crisis playing out in our city's parks and natural areas.

The project received feedback from houseless community members that they wanted to see more flexible employment opportunities for the unhoused community in natural areas and the Human Nature pilot project was launched. The pilot sought to engage youth and adults experiencing homelessness in a paid, nature-based stewardship program that would support ties to place, build resilient communities, and strengthen neighborhood relationships. Participants would work with local natural resource agencies, performing tasks like waste pickup, invasive plant removal, tree planting and other beautification activities in public spaces including parks, storm-water swales and natural areas. We envisioned both a youth and an adult crew engaging in paid stewardship projects and got to work setting up a program that was expected to launch in the summer of 2020.

In the spring of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic turned the world upside down and derailed our plans for a pilot. We had set out from the beginning to create a program that would be adaptive, holistic and responsive to community input. The COVID-19



A man and his dog embrace in front of a hand washing station

pandemic and protests over racial injustice in our city brought the crises and inequities in public health, housing and the environment that we had initially sought to address into focus once again. To respond to the most urgent needs of unhoused community members, we strategized to redistribute Human Nature grant funds to set up hand washing and hygiene stations around the city, getting Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) out to unhoused community members and outreach workers and create an online platform to continue to host Trauma Informed Care trainings for environmental workers virtually.

This paper tells one small part of the story of hygiene in our city during the COVID-19 pandemic. We will discuss the challenges we encountered in creating the Human Nature Hygiene Project and share stories about the necessity of hygiene access for all and the community that organizing it can provide. This is a story of how we can build ecologies of community care in times of crisis, creating networks of mutualism that will help us to survive together, through this crisis and those we will face in the future of our changing planet.

Principles of Trauma Informed Care

Since its inception, the Human Nature project has been guided by the principles of Trauma Informed Care. The project seeks to recognize the humanity of all those we work with, from those experiencing homelessness to well-meaning city employees doing their best while operating within a culture of scarcity. Throughout this project, we have witnessed how a culture of scarcity permeates our city's agencies, too often resulting in compromises that damage and undercut relationships with the unhoused community. We have also seen through our own project how building trust, collaboration and relationship is the very thing that is so needed right now.

The Human Nature project is informed by the following Trauma Informed Care principles:¹

- **Safety:** Ensuring that all involved in the project, including administrators, hosts and those the program serves feel physically and psychologically safe
- **Trustworthiness & Transparency:** Operations and decisions are conducted with transparency with the goal of building and maintaining trust
- **Peer Support:** Peer support is essential for establishing safety and hope, building trust, enhancing collaboration and utilizing lived experience to promote recovery and healing. The term “peers” refers to individuals with lived experiences of trauma
- **Collaboration & Mutuality:** Importance is placed on leveling power differences, demonstrating that healing happens in relationship and in the meaningful sharing of power and decision-making
- **Empowerment, Voice & Choice:** Individual’s strengths and experiences are recognized and built upon
- **Cultural, Historical and Gender Context:** Works to move past cultural stereotypes and biases, offers gender responsive services and recognizes and addresses historical trauma

COVID Impacts on Hygiene Access for the Unhoused Community in Portland

Before the COVID-19 pandemic forced many businesses and community spaces to close their doors or restrict access, shelters, day centers and public restrooms were relied upon by thousands of Portlanders for hygiene access as they navigated surviving on our city’s streets, in vehicles and other spaces that lack bathrooms and running water. As fear of the spread of COVID-19 swept the city in the Spring of 2020, businesses, shelters, day spaces, libraries and even park bathrooms halted public restroom access or closed their doors all together. One Hygiene Station host describes that, “The shelters have pretty much closed their doors, the day shelter is only doing meals. And so a place that people were dependent on for showers, phones, bathroom use and toiletries- that’s all gone.”² While these facilities closed in hopes of limiting the spread of the virus, the lack of hygiene facility access for our community’s most vulnerable greatly increased the risk of the spread of infectious disease, including but not limited to COVID-19.

As services for the unhoused community are operating at limited capacity, the numbers of people experiencing homelessness has drastically increased as unemployment rates soar nationwide. A study by Columbia University³ has predicted

a 40-45% rise in homelessness nationwide resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing economic turmoil, estimating 800,000 Americans could be experiencing homelessness by the summer of 2020. The pre-pandemic estimates of the homeless population in Portland taken from the 2019 Point in Time survey estimated that there were 4,015 people experiencing homelessness in Multnomah County, however many advocates estimate that the population is larger.⁴ A 45% spike, as predicted by the Columbia study, would mean that an estimated 5,821 Portlanders would lack housing by the summer of 2020.⁵ An end to the eviction moratorium that only extends through December 2020 would place more people at risk of becoming houseless.

Black and Indigenous communities are already disproportionately represented in the unhoused population in Portland and are at greater risk of becoming homeless as the eviction moratorium ends. According to the 2019 Point in Time Survey, Native Americans made up 11.6% of the unhoused population in Multnomah County despite making up only 2.5% of Multnomah County’s population. Similarly, Black or African American identifying folks makeup 16.1% of the county’s unhoused population, while being only 7.2% of the general county’s population.

Updated data on the unhoused population in 2020 have yet to be completed, but the spike is already being seen by those on the streets. One hygiene station guest explains, “I’ve definitely noticed, like especially right as COVID began, there was a huge increase of homeless people.” Another community member describes that since the pandemic began, “There sure are a lot more people out there. And they’re just camping everywhere. And then they get moved here, moved there, and it’s like what do you expect them to do? You know, they can’t go inside because everything is shut down. So it’s really hard to get anybody to help them... It’s gotten pretty bad out there.”

As hygiene facilities became increasingly scarce, those experiencing homelessness found themselves having to travel even farther from their encampments to find access to running water, restrooms and showers. As one hand washing station steward describes it, “It takes people a ton of time just to find access to running water to wash their hands. If you get sick, if you drink the wrong kind of water and then you have gastrointestinal distress and you need to go urgently, then you have fecal matter on your hands and you have to walk a mile to try to find somewhere to wash your hands, it’s just out of the question.” For the elderly and those with disabilities, traveling these distances for hygiene access often becomes an impassable barrier. These distances also create safety issues,

1 Trauma Informed Oregon. “TIO: Trauma Informed Care Principles,” April 23, 2020. <https://traumainformedoregon.org/resources/trauma-informed-care-principles/>.

2 *How COVID Has Affected the Homeless Community? Section II*, 2020. www.youtube.com/watch?v=nch4_aeuiZk.

3 Community Solutions Homelessness Report. “Analysis on Unemployment Projects 40-45% Increase in Homelessness This Year,” August 28, 2020. <https://community.solutions/analysis-on-unemployment-projects-40-45-increase-in->

[homelessness-this-year/](#).

4 City of Portland; Home Forward; A Home for Everyone; Multnomah County; City of Gresham; Conklin, Tiffany Renée; Mulder, Cameron; and Regional Research Institute, Portland State University, “2019 Point-in-Time: Count of Homelessness in Portland/Gresham/Multnomah County, Oregon” (2019). *Regional Research Institute*. 63 <https://archives.pdx.edu/ds/psu/29201>.

5 Vespa, Maggie. “Study Predicts National Homelessness Spike Due to COVID-19. Here’s What It Means for Portland’s Housing Crisis,” July 4, 2020. <https://www.kgw.com/article/news/local/homeless/portland-homeless-crisis-coronavirus-pandemic-impact/283-f311d4cb-578b-4d2c-9775-491e4f6a7c55>.

Factors that increase need for consistent hygiene facility access:

- Pregnancy
- Menstruation
- Disabilities
- Illness
- Age
- Marginalized gender identities

especially for those with marginalized gender identities. When bathroom or hygiene needs arise in the middle of the night, people must leave their shelter to search for hygiene access in the dark, risking their own safety and the loss of the possessions they leave behind.

At one camp the Human Nature project served, residents reported that on a good day it was at least a half mile walk from the camp to the nearest place to use the restroom or wash their hands. One camp even said they were looking into the cost of renting a portable toilet themselves, pooling money that residents had made through collecting and depositing cans to pay the rental fees. Members of this community were in such dire need of hygiene facility access that they were willing to have less food to eat if it meant they could have a bathroom nearby.

Lack of hygiene access also has a social impact that further increases the stigmatization and dehumanization of the unhoused community. As one advocate for the unhoused community told us, “Cleanliness is one of the things that brings us closer to our own humanity, and losing access to that is just another aspect of the qualities of life that the houseless lose that separate us and make us human beings.” As one unhoused community member told us, “Staying clean, it’s not just COVID, it’s everything. It’s quality of life, and there’s no quality of life out here.” Lack of hygiene access is also a major barrier for social and economic advancement. As one hand washing station user describes it, “How are you supposed to stop being homeless, how are you supposed to get a job? You can’t even wash your hands, you can’t wash your hair, you smell!”

The criminalization of the homeless also creates significant barriers to consistent hygiene access. Longtime houseless rights advocate Ibrahim Mubarak explains, “They can’t take showers. And if you do wash up outside and the police catch you changing clothes, they can give you a citation for indecent exposure.”

The forced eviction of encampments, often referred to as “sweeps,” present an additional barrier to consistent hygiene access for the houseless community as individuals are displaced and their property, including essential hygiene and survival supplies, are seized or lost. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) guidance for cities engaging with unhoused encampments during COVID-19 warned against evicting camps, as it greatly increases the risk of spreading the virus among an already vulnerable group. The CDC states that that:

“Allow people who are living unsheltered or in encampments to remain where they are if individual housing options are not available. Clearing encampments can cause people to disperse throughout the community and break connections with service providers. This increases the potential for infectious disease spread.... Work together with community coalition members to improve sanitation in encampments. Ensure nearby restroom facilities have functional water taps, are stocked with hand hygiene materials (soap, drying materials) and bath tissue, and remain open to people experiencing homelessness 24 hours per day. If toilets or handwashing facilities are not available nearby, assist with providing access to portable latrines with handwashing facilities for encampments of more than 10 people.”⁶

However, despite the guidance of public health officials, there was no moratorium on evictions of encampments in Portland during the pandemic. At the beginning of the pandemic, The City of Portland announced an “increased threshold for what necessitates cleanup, reducing the number of encampments posted and focusing efforts on encampments with significant

6 Center for Disease Control. “People Experiencing Homelessness,” May 10, 2020. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/homeless-shelters/unsheltered-homelessness.html>.

presence of hazardous materials that present a public health and safety risk. Response teams are also ensuring campers have access to hand sanitizer and information on the pandemic.”⁷ While responses may vary across agencies, houseless advocates have stated that sweeps in Portland only paused briefly and were never halted all together, with the frequency of these evictions intensifying once again by June of 2020.⁸

These evictions disregard CDC recommendations. These evictions are enormously destabilizing and make consistent hygiene access next to impossible. One unhoused community member told us that it was a lot easier when the lockdown first started, because people knew they were staying in one place. He said this stability gave folks a sense of ownership. People keep their camps cleaner if they know they aren’t going to be forced to move and have places to put garbage without being fined. He says, “If you’re in one place, you can keep yourself clean, get a job and be taken seriously. Instead of making us nomads, you should put effort into helping us keep our places clean.” He went on to explain that if unhoused people had a place they could stay and take care of, like the empty lots around town owned and maintained by city agencies, with access to trash pick up, porta potties, and being able to shower sometimes without getting pneumonia, they could be basically self sustaining. Even encampments where the City had placed emergency hand washing stations and restroom facilities throughout the pandemic, like those at Laurelhurst Park, we’re still evicted, forcing residents to move and leave behind sanitation access that the City itself had provided.

The City has sought to address hygiene needs in the unhoused community during COVID-19 by placing 100 portable toilets and 22 hand washing stations⁹ throughout the city. However, public response to the placement of these resources has been increasingly negative, ranging from angry phone calls and emails and escalating to the point of vandalism of trucks delivering the toilets and aggressive confrontations between housed residents and the workers installing the facilities.¹⁰ These altercations reflect growing anti-houseless sentiments from housed community members. One housed resident in a neighborhood where one of these toilets was sited wrote in a letter to City officials that, “We and our neighbors are concerned that these toilets will entice campers into our vulnerable middle class neighborhoods... These toilets do not belong in residential areas. It is an open secret that homeless camps tend to attract criminal activity.” The coordinator of the portable toilet program

states that “Almost 90% of the complaints our program has received regarding these units are related to stigma connected to the homeless population and complaints about things that ‘could happen,’ but have not happened.”

Local advocates are thankful that these facilities are in place, but say that with more consideration and outreach to the communities the City was hoping to serve the facilities could have been much more accessible and beneficial. Had homeowners been notified before the placement of these facilities, it’s possible there would have been more buy-in from housed residents, reducing conflicts. Many housed residents were confused as to why the facilities were placed in their neighborhoods we’re there were few encampments of unhoused residents.¹¹ The City reported that the facilities were not intended to solely serve the unhoused community, and were placed where bathroom access in the city was scarcest, not necessarily where they would be most accessible to the houseless community.

As city employees and community members alike bear witness to the enormity of the crisis playing out on the streets, both real and perceived resource scarcity too often undermines and prevents the critical trust and relationship building efforts required to meaningfully engage with the unhoused community. Approaches to hygiene access that center the importance of relationship building with both housed and unhoused residents to gain neighborhood support of the project will have greater impact to not only improve hygiene access, but work to dismantle stereotypes, build community and ground residents in a sense of connection to community and place.

Key Takeaways:

COVID-19 has led to extreme scarcity of hygiene facilities, unhoused community members often must travel long distances to take care of basic hygiene needs

Criminalization and forced evictions make consistent hygiene facility access even more difficult

Efforts to address hygiene access without relationship building, community collaboration and buy-in can inflame neighborhood tensions

7 “City Has Raised Threshold for Campsite Cleanups, Focusing on Health and Safety during COVID-19 Crisis,” April 3, 2020. The City of Portland. <https://www.portlandoregon.gov/toolkit/article/765366>.

8 Senn, L. (2020, June 12). Opinion: Amid pandemic, city and Multnomah County must step up housing, facilities for the houseless. Retrieved December 04, 2020, from <https://www.oregonlive.com/opinion/2020/06/opinion-amid-pandemic-city-and-multnomah-county-must-step-up-housing-facilities-for-the-houseless.html>.

9 Vespa, Maggie. “Dozens of Angry Emails’: Red Port-a-Potties, Meant to Help Portland’s Homeless, Spark Anger and Vandalism.” October 14, 2020. <https://www.kgw.com/article/news/local/red-port-a-potties-meant-to-help-portlands-homeless-spark-anger-vandalism/283-52d38add-41fa-459f-a9d0-7162c8c83012>.

10 Acker, Lizzy. “Portable Toilets in SE Portland Stolen, Vandalized in Escalating Fight between City and Neighbors,” December 2, 2020. <https://www.oregonlive.com/portland/2020/12/portable-toilets-in-southeast-portland-stolen-vandalized-in-escalating-fight-between-city-and-neighbors.html>.

11 Vespa, M. (2020, October 14). ‘Dozens of angry emails’: Red port-a-potties, meant to help Portland’s homeless, spark anger and vandalism. Retrieved December 03, 2020, from <https://www.kgw.com/article/news/local/red-port-a-potties-meant-to-help-portlands-homeless-spark-anger-vandalism/283-52d38add-41fa-459f-a9d0-7162c8c83012>.

Redistributing Funds from the Human Nature Pilot

After it became apparent that the Human Nature pilot program would be unable to move forward due to social distancing requirements, we sought input from local houseless rights advocates from the Stop the Sweeps Coalition to assess how we could best put these funds to use. Without a clear outcome in mind, the hygiene project evolved organically in conversation with advocates as we attempted to problem-solve in real time to meet community needs during an unprecedented public health crisis. We strategized to reallocate grant funds to address hygiene access. Improving the health of watershed ecosystems, reducing waste in urban greenspaces and cultivating roots in community care have always been central to BEF's work and to the Human Nature program. The pandemic brought renewed meaning and importance to the role that hygiene access can have in improving environmental and public health.

This intersection of public health and the environment was also clear to unhoused community members. One unhoused community member told us that they had major concerns about the ecological impact of folks living in houseless camps. Due to lack of hygiene facilities and trash pick-up services that housed residents enjoy, fecal matter run-off into bodies of water, and general litter from camps makes an impact on the environment. Although this impact is no greater than that of housed residents, pollution tends to be more visible.

The first hygiene need the project sought to address was the lack of places for unhoused community members to wash their hands. To meet this need, BEF worked with the Western Regional Advocacy Project (WRAP) to install their model for basic hand washing stations throughout the city. The WRAP model for hand washing stations consists of a sturdy wood table and a 20-gallon rubbermaid trash can with a hole drilled



A WRAP Model handwashing station sits in front of an encampment.



A "Seattle Model" handwashing station sits in front of a native plant bed at the Friends of Trees office

into the side with a hose bib attached. The basin can be filled with water and the lever on the outside used to let water flow out. This model of hand washing station must be refilled with water every 4-6 days. Twenty-five of these models have been placed in greenspaces throughout the city, aiming to serve encampments of more than a dozen residents consistently staying in the area. While several of these stations went missing throughout the course of the project, they are low cost and are easily replaced.

The other type of hand washing station installed was referred to as the Seattle model, after the Seattle based Real Change and UW architecture professors who blueprinted the design. This model consisted of a stand-alone utility sink hooked up to a consistent source of running water like a hose spigot. A metered faucet allows for only a certain amount of water to go out at a time to reduce water waste. At the base of the utility sink, the water drains out into a high saturation plant bed with low maintenance, water-tolerant plants like sedge and bog rosemary. Biodegradable soap is provided at the station and all grey water is absorbed by the native plant bed. One of these stations has been sited at Friends of Trees, a local tree planting organization, who allowed us to install a Seattle model hand washing station in front of their office. While the first sink went missing, the relatively low cost of materials meant it could be replaced.

Response to the hand washing stations from both unhoused and housed community members has been overwhelmingly positive. One unhoused community member told us, "Thank you so much for putting this in, it's impossible to find water out here. Look at my hands, they're filthy. I'm 63 years old tomorrow, I have chronic hip pain, I can't walk around trying to find a place to wash my hands. It's really important." Another described the sense of community built by having someone regularly return to tend to the hand washing stations and check in on other community needs, "Having you guys come out here and helping us out, not just the water but like helping us with

food, keeping us informed, it's like having our own superheroes in the city, yanno?"

As hand washing stations started going up in greenspaces and encampments around the city, we turned our focus towards another pressing hygiene need in the community, the need for public restroom access. The project reached out to businesses, churches and community centers in Central Southeast Portland, where community advisors with the Stop the Sweeps Coalition had told us that restroom access was particularly scarce, to ask if they would be willing to host two or three portable toilets that would be funded and maintained by Human Nature funds. An additional incentive was offered of planting native plants around the restroom area to beautify the space and provide additional value to the portable toilet host. Of the four prospective hosts contacted, one didn't respond and two didn't have sufficient space or neighbor approval to host a portable toilet. The Social Justice Action Center (SJAC), a community center located in Central SE, showed interest in hosting portable toilets in their enclosed backyard space. Initial scoping was done for the project but ultimately the tenants that live above the community center were in opposition to the placement of the facility as they worried about the flow of traffic past the entrance to their apartment.

From this foundation, SJAC offered to open their internal bathroom to the community several hours a week. The idea came together that these "open bathroom hours" could be a hygiene hub, with a 24-hr handwashing station out front and free hygiene and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to distribute. To start, we scheduled three, three hour shifts a week for 10 weeks. Initial shifts were Fridays and Saturdays from 4-7pm and Sundays 6-9pm. These hours were selected with the input from the Stop the Sweeps Coalition as weekend evenings after social services have closed tend to be when bathroom access is scarcest. The Hygiene Station provides disability affirmative and dignified bathroom access, 24-hr outdoor hand washing, and is a hub for free hygiene supplies and PPE, including hand sanitizer, facemasks, tooth paste, deodorant, feminine hygiene supplies, socks, underwear, hand warmers and razors. One guest of the Hygiene Station stressed how essential these supplies truly are, saying, "It's all the supplies that you really can't get or you are not going to find on a Friday, and you're not going to be able to find them for two days. And to be honest, it prevents you from having to do crimes and stuff to get the supplies."

The project wanted to stick to its origins of finding paid opportunities for unhoused community members and was able to offer reimbursement for unhoused and formerly unhoused community member time maintaining the space. Fundraising efforts are underway to get both supply and cash donations, hopefully allowing us to expand open hygiene station hours and provide more subcontracting positions for housing insecure community members during a time of economic hardship.

For guests of the hygiene station, having peer support from those with lived experience in homelessness makes a big difference. One guest told us, "visiting here, it does kind of give you a sense of community. That's been kind of hard to achieve



Snacks, hygiene supplies and informational flyers at the hygiene station

A poster advertising the features, location and hours of the SJAC Hygiene Station



Expertise of unhoused and formerly unhoused hosts includes:

- De-escalation
- Conflict resolution
- Harm reduction
- Familiarity with common stressors
- Peer support

this year.” Hosts with lived experiences of homelessness provide essential expertise that allows them to best serve community members. This expertise has allowed our program to flourish, successfully providing dignified restroom and hygiene supply access to over 800 community members without incident.

Since the project opened at the beginning of October, the Hygiene Station has served 2000 individuals and almost 50 families. Hygiene Station guest's self reported demographics: 26% BIPOC, 27% disabled, 17% LGBTQ+, 19% over 50 years old.

For many, having access to an indoor bathroom with hot water and the amenities of a full sized bathroom are a rarity during COVID. One guest explained that, “At the beginning of the COVID thing, I went for a couple months without seeing myself in a mirror... and there was the mirror and I was like ‘Whoa.’ I actually asked for a minute alone so I could just look at myself. It was kind of a powerful moment. Like wow a mirror. This is what I look like. I looked like I aged like 10 years in three months.”

Alongside the distribution of essential hygiene supplies, the SJAC Hygiene Station became a hub for disseminating informational flyers and pamphlets created by local homeless-led advocacy groups. These flyers ranged from information about how to survive COVID-19 on the streets, to pamphlets on preventing mold and mildew from developing inside tents. Both the informational materials and the station hosts play an essential role in connecting unhoused community members to local organizing projects working to advance rights of homeless people. The hygiene station helps to build a framework of relationships and connections that can assist community members in getting other critical survival needs met and building community power.

Key Takeaways:

Responsiveness to community needs and input allowed us to develop a project that would be both beneficial and accessible to the community we were trying to serve

Low cost facilities allowed for easy replacement in case of loss or damage

Relationship building should be a central goal of the project and should connect people to organizing projects like the Stop the Sweeps coalition so that participants can advocate to change the systems that impact their lives

Hosts with lived experiences in homelessness have unique skills and expertise and intimate knowledge of the community they serve



A host hands a coffee over the hygiene station table to a guest

Hygiene Project Budget

WRAP Model handwashing stations cost \$60 per facility, plus two hours of construction time and 1-2 hours a week for refills and site visits. The Seattle model is a more expensive but more permanent facility with low maintenance needs, and costs \$300 per facility and requires 3 hours of labor for assembly.

The operating budget for the SJAC Hygiene Station is \$3,750 a month. The budget allocates:

- \$2,900 to support reimbursement for community member's time running the space and administrative costs
- \$150 for cleaning and bathroom supplies
- \$300 for socks and underwear
- \$180 supports food and warm beverages
- \$200 for outreach supplies including feminine hygiene products, toothpaste, deodorant and razors
- \$20 for printing flyers and outreach materials

Hygiene Project Challenges & Learnings

Addressing hygiene access through the SJAC Hygiene Station and dispersed hand washing stations has not been without its challenges. An initial iteration of the Hygiene Station project attempted to site porta potties on private property by asking business, churches and community organizations to host the portable toilets on their property. Groups that were contacted cited lack of space and Good Neighbor Agreements¹² that prevented placement of such facilities. Another barrier to placing portable toilets is that they must be sited within

¹² According to the [City of Portland's website](#), Good Neighbor Agreements are “a tool for having a conversation about concerns and expectations, then coming to agreement on whatever issues arise. This is a neighborly approach to problem-solving, but is not a binding legal document.”

approximately 20 feet of a roadway so that they can be serviced by maintenance vehicles. An additional cost barrier became that in addition to the portable toilet rental fee, there are weekly or monthly maintenance costs. These include additional fees for the removal of foreign objects from the toilet. In the case that hypodermic needles are disposed of in the toilet basin, there is an additional cost for biohazard cleaning, meaning that the project budget could be quickly drained in cleaning fees alone.

As our hygiene station sought to open in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, creating a thorough COVID protocol for the hygiene station was key. These protocols included asking hosts to disinfect all high touch surfaces inside the community center and wipe down these areas each time someone entered the space. We also asked hosts to only allow one person in the space at a time, ensure that every person entering the space wears a facemask and keep those waiting in line socially distanced. The program also commissioned a local artist, Derek Leitch, to create a cartoon explaining COVID protocol for guests.

Central to the goals of the hygiene project that endured from the origins of the Human Nature project was low-barrier access to subcontracting opportunities for unhoused community members. Stipends honor hosts for their expertise, time spent in an advisory role in the project planning and their time staffing the space. The skill and expertise that unhoused and formerly unhoused folks have makes them particularly qualified to do outreach and relationship building within the unhoused community and is key to the success of the hygiene center.

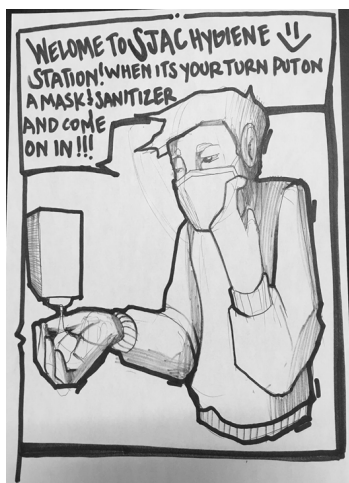
A foundational goal of the Human Nature program was to ensure that these opportunities for community members were as low barrier as possible. To this end, we needed to create a low barrier tracking system, which asked station hosts to text one program manager at the end of their shift letting them know how many people were served during the shift. The program also offered to provide phones for hosts who didn't have consistent phone access to assist them in sending timesheets and communicating with program managers and other hosts if they were going to miss a shift.



Hygiene Station hosts smile, welcoming people into the space

Difficulties that arose with the roll out of the hand washing stations included barriers to refilling the stations and hand washing stations going missing. The water basins need to be refilled biweekly, roughly every 4-6 days. Unexpected barriers to refilling the stations that arose included physical barriers placed that blocked access to the camps and personal emergencies of those tasked with refilling that delayed water delivery. If the stations were left unfilled, they were much more likely to be mistaken as having another use and taken to be used as a trash can. If empty, the stations can also be blown away by the wind.

Spreading out the refilling responsibility to multiple people could make these barriers easier to overcome as more time could be spent attending to each individual station. Another solution is modifying the hand washing stations to make them harder to move. For example, the first table of the hand washing station at the SJAC Hygiene Station went missing. Since this facility is on a busy street and there are not always people at the community center to look out for the station, we had concrete blocks lag bolted to the legs of the table to make it harder to move.



A cartoon depicts hygiene protocol at the station, including putting on hand sanitizer and a mask, washing your hands and disinfecting all the high touch areas in the bathroom

While initially the project sought to recruit residents of the camps themselves to refill the stations, water access for the unhoused proved to be an enormous barrier as businesses often refused to let people use their water spigots, even threatening to call the police or charging people a fee for access to their water. One unhoused community member told us that, “There're so many spigots around town on businesses that aren't being used ever, but if I try to use it, I'll get arrested.”

Buy-in from those residing within the encampments where the stations are cited also made a difference in the frequency of the stations going missing, as invested residents will be more likely to keep an eye out for the station. One hand washing station user described, “We want to show that we can take care of these stations. It means a lot seeing someone trying to help us out in this situation... We know this one thing can be here for a long time if we take care of it. Most of us know that... It's what I tell my kids, something that is a little gesture to you can mean so much to someone else.” Building and maintaining relationships with the community members the project is attempting to serve was essential in placing hand washing stations where they would be most beneficial and accessible.

Ultimately, the efforts to improve hygiene access through the Human Nature program are insufficient to address the enormous and increasing needs we are witnessing in our city. While we hope that in collaboration with the Stop the Sweeps Coalition, the Hygiene Station can help to connect people to means of organizing to use their expertise to advocate to make change at a systems level, these hygiene facilities themselves ultimately do not work to alter the systems that have created such a crisis in our streets. These efforts are merely small gestures, attempting to address critical challenge points of insufficient resources, neighborhood hostilities and provide essential resources where there are enormous gaps.

Key Learnings and Takeaways:

Hygiene Center:

- Having hygiene center hosts with lived experience made the center a welcoming place that provided thoughtful services that diversified and improved over time
- Establishing open communication with neighbors helped the center gain a positive reputation and maintain the support of local residents.

Handwashing stations:

- While labor-intensive to refill, the regular visits of the station attendant helped build relationships and establish trust.
- The use of simple, low cost and readily available materials allowed the program to be experimental and replace missing stations with relative ease.
- In many cases people took ownership of stations and kept them in good condition and cared for.
- The multifunctional nature of the Seattle model stations may have increased their acceptability to partners.

Long Term Goals of the Hygiene Station Project

We are currently looking into other sources of grant funding and are working to crowdsource donations to keep the hygiene station open and expand hours. In the Spring, SJAC would like to continue its efforts to beautify the community center space with native plants, community clean ups and new murals from local artists. We also aspire to expand the offerings of the hygiene station to continue to provide low-barrier hygiene and wellness resources to the unhoused community.



Local houseless-rights activists gather for eviction defense of a camp in a city park

bibliography

Acker, Lizzy. "Portable Toilets in SE Portland Stolen, Vandalized in Escalating Fight between City and Neighbors," December 2, 2020. <https://www.oregonlive.com/portland/2020/12/portable-toilets-in-southeast-portland-stolen-vandalized-in-escalating-fight-between-city-and-neighbors.html>.

Center for Disease Control. "People Experiencing Homelessness," May 10, 2020. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/homeless-shelters/unsheltered-homelessness.html>.

"City Has Raised Threshold for Campsite Cleanups, Focusing on Health and Safety during COVID-19 Crisis," April 3, 2020. The City of Portland. <https://www.portlandoregon.gov/toolkit/article/765366>.

City of Portland; Home Forward; A Home for Everyone; Multnomah County; City of Gresham; Conklin, Tiffany Renée; Mulder, Cameron; and Regional Research Institute, Portland State University, "2019 Point-in-Time: Count of Homelessness in Portland/Gresham/Multnomah County, Oregon" (2019). *Regional Research Institute*. 63 <https://archives.pdx.edu/ds/psu/29201>.

Community Solutions Homelessness Report. "Analysis on Unemployment Projects 40-45% Increase in Homelessness This Year," August 28, 2020. <https://community.solutions/analysis-on-unemployment-projects-40-45-increase-in-homelessness-this-year/>.

How COVID Has Affected the Houseless Community? Section II, 2020. www.youtube.com/watch?v=nch4_aeuizk.

Senn, Linda. "Opinion: Amid Pandemic, City and Multnomah County Must Step up Housing, Facilities for the Houseless," June 12, 2020. <https://www.oregonlive.com/opinion/2020/06/opinion-amid-pandemic-city-and-multnomah-county-must-step-up-housing-facilities-for-the-houseless.html>.

Trauma Informed Oregon. "TIO: Trauma Informed Care Principles," April 23, 2020. <https://traumainformedoregon.org/resources/trauma-informed-care-principles/>.

Vespa, Maggie. "Study Predicts National Homelessness Spike Due to COVID-19. Here's What It Means for Portland's Housing Crisis," July 4, 2020. <https://www.kgw.com/article/news/local/homeless/portland-homeless-crisis-coronavirus-pandemic-impact/283-f311d4cb-578b-4d2c-9775-491e4f6a7c55>.

Vespa, Maggie. "'Dozens of Angry Emails': Red Port-a-Potties, Meant to Help Portland's Homeless, Spark Anger and Vandalism," October 14, 2020. <https://www.kgw.com/article/news/local/red-port-a-potties-meant-to-help-portlands-homeless-spark-anger-vandalism/283-52d38add-41fa-459f-a9d0-7162c8c83012>.

appendix a

While forces including systemic racism, oppressive policies and institutions are the primary drivers of homelessness, trauma informed practice also reminds us that mutuality, voice and context must be centered in our work.

- **Collaboration & Mutuality:** Importance is placed on leveling power differences, demonstrating that healing happens in relationship and in the meaningful sharing of power and decision-making
- **Empowerment, Voice & Choice:** Individual's strengths and experiences are recognized and built upon
- **Cultural, Historical and Gender Context:** Works to move past cultural stereotypes and biases, offers gender responsive services and recognizes and addresses historical trauma

In this spirit, we share some of the stories of individuals project partners were able to meet. Names and key identifying attributes have been changed.

Stories of the People We Serve

A

A is newly back in Portland, only two days. She has hitchhiked all around the west. She loves the handwashing stations, both for washing her hands, but also because it's the only place she can consistently wash her hair. A few years ago, she fell out of the bed of a pickup truck and fractured the top of her skull as well as the orbital skull around her left eye. From that accident she has a plate in her face and on the top of her head, as well as a traumatic brain injury. This is the first place she has been able to find community, and usually she doesn't stay in one camp very long. She would love to be able to live inside, but since the injury, she is prone to migraines that last days, has issues with short term memory, and can't work. The disability she receives is not enough to afford even a room in most places.

Some of her major concerns are the ecological impact of folks living in homeless camps. Not of their own fault, but the necessity for single use plastics, fecal matter run off into bodies of water, and general litter makes an impact on the environment. "We gotta protect our trees, the ocean, the algae, or else how will we survive?"

She also has concerns about the city and issues with housing and how we treat our unhoused neighbors. She believes that Section 8 and other subsidized affordable housing should be more available for folks to apply to, and that often those pathways are overrun and it takes a really long time to get any response. Another topic she brought up were the sweeps, she believes they are wrong, especially in a pandemic, and particularly how difficult it is to get one's belongings back. If the issue is about trash or camps looking untidy, a solution

could be to have designated trash pick up to help keep the camps clean. In addition, having more accessible porta potties makes a huge difference, and mitigates the potential safety risk of having to walk upwards of a mile and a half in the middle of the night to find a place to use the restroom. She also believes there should be more accessible and free medical care, and is disturbed by the fact that some programs her friends find themselves too old for, but other programs they are too young for. She writes political poetry and hopes to participate in some open mics when the city opens up again.

B

B is a former axeman. Before coming to Portland, he lived in his car. He really doesn't want to be on the streets anymore and is trying to transition to living indoors. It is incredibly hard because it is hard to get a job without a stable location and consistent access to bathing. He really appreciates these stations for that, because it allows you to wash dirt off of your hands and face. "If you can stay in one place, and keep yourself clean, you can get a job and be taken seriously by employers." He believes that there should at least be stations like this near every camp. "Staying clean, it's not just Covid, it's everything. It's quality of life, and there's no quality of life out here."

He says it was a lot easier, when the lockdown first started, because they knew they were staying in one place, because it gave folks a sense of ownership. People keep their camps cleaner if they know they aren't going to be swept and have places to put garbage without being fined, he says. "Instead of putting in effort to make us basically nomads, what if they put effort into helping us keep our places clean?"

"We're not even homeless, just houseless, home is here together, wherever." George says it's hard for people to care about keeping areas clean when they feel like the city doesn't care about them. He says that at night the women sometimes have to walk a mile to use the restroom in a portapotty. "We need more port-a-potties, the city doesn't care about our safety... I just want my group to be safe." He says if they had a place they could stay, take care of, like the empty lots around town owned and maintained by PBOT, with access to trash pick up, porta potties, and being able to shower sometimes without getting pneumonia, they could be basically self sustaining. He thinks the handwashing stations we are putting in are a great start. "We really appreciate the stations, it means a lot to us." B hasn't given up hope, and with this community feels like he is happier and has more community and support than he has ever felt before, but wishes it could be easier for himself and others to make positive changes, especially those suffering from drug addiction. "We have fun, surprisingly, we laugh a lot but it's serious."

C

C is an immigrant and has been in Portland for over a decade and had been working before the pandemic. He likes it more than other parts of the US because of the bus system and how accessible the city is. He says another member of his camp is like a brother to him.

C says he feels blessed to have the water from the hand washing station, as before they had to go so far to get water. He uses it before breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and sometimes when he is thirsty. "I use it every morning, every camp should have one." A while ago, a bunch of people got sick and were suffering from diarrhea. He believes it was because of the water they were drinking in the dog park, because when they stopped, everyone felt better. He says it helps people here a lot and helps them stay clean and healthy.

D

D has lived in Portland all of his life and has been at this camp for a couple of months. He thinks every camp should have one of these handwashing stations. When the station got stolen at their camp, they were really mad and they were worried it would ruin it for everyone, and that they wouldn't get another one. "You'd be surprised how often it comes in handy." There's lots of mud and many people are just dirty all the time as a result." He uses it mostly to wash his hands and to wash food before eating it.

He says if the city was more organized and that they could have trash pick up. He says they can get some of their trash picked up, but they don't know when that will happen. Knowing exactly when they would come would be really helpful. He also talked about his struggles with addiction and seeing others in the city who also suffer as a result. He believes that all the young people doing drugs, if they got more chances and more help, instead of going to jail, that you don't know what they could be capable of achieving. He thinks kids need to be shown there is more than just drugs, and that we need to save the youngin's. He wanted to reiterate at the end of our interview that they do really appreciate these stations.

E

E moved here because his daughter lives in Portland. In addition to being closer to his daughter, he moved to the city to get more treatment for drugs and mental illness. He was clean for a year and nine months, then relapsed on meth. His first addiction was vicodin and it ruined his marriage. He is surprised he is still alive. He says he didn't know anybody, but found community. "We take care of each other."

He thinks that we should definitely put the hand washing stations in every camp. Without it, he's unsure where they would get water. In the winter the water gets shut off and other places charge you money or make you buy something to use their water. He also believes that consistent trash pick up would help them a lot, and would help the camp look nicer. He wanted to tell people that "We are all the same, some are just struggling more than others." In the store, he gets dirty looks from people. E believes you shouldn't judge someone by their looks, that you can't see who they really are; he used to work in a lumber mill and as a woodcutter.

appendix b

There were more compelling quotes shared by community members than could be included in this report, and additional quotes and quotes used are included here, organized by theme.

Impact of COVID-19

“How has COVID impacted the homeless community? Well it’s sickened some, saddened some and it’s killed a lot”

“There sure are a lot more people out there. And they’re just camping everywhere. And then they get moved here, moved there, and it’s like what do you expect them to do? You know, they can’t go inside because everything is shut down. So it’s really hard to get anybody to help them... It’s gotten pretty bad out there.”

“There has also been a fragmenting of the community, the homeless community, at least the one that I’m experienced with, in that the shelters have pretty much closed its doors, the day shelter is only doing meals. And so a place that people were dependent on for showers, phones, bathroom use and toiletries- that’s all gone. Not as many people are in a central location so they’re not in touch with each other as often.”

“Cleanliness is next to godliness. That’s been true since before COVID but I think COVID is more a lesson in the importance of cleanliness.”

“I see a lot of alienation, isolation. I’ve experienced a lot of alienation, isolation, and a lot of trauma and stuff.”

“Before COVID there was lots of shelters and lots of access to places you could go to be warm and there were more places that would give out tents and tarps and all the stuff that kept you warm. And now with COVID most of those places are shut down or at a capacity so low that it’s almost not there.”

“I’ve definitely noticed, like especially right as COVID began, there was a huge increase of homeless people.”

Barriers to Hygiene Access

“They can’t take showers. And if you do wash up outside and the police catch you changing clothes, they can give you a citation for indecent exposure which is a mild sex offense.”

SJAC Hygiene Station

“People in the streets will accept other people caring about them, and I think that’s what the hygiene station provides.”

“The houseless people thank us for having this resource center here.”

“And it’s so appreciated. I see that on everyone who stops, they’re appreciating every little bit.”

“It’s all the supplies that you really can’t get or you are not going to find on a Friday, you’re not going to be able to find for two days. And to be honest, it prevents you from having to do crimes and stuff to get the supplies.”

“Visiting here, it does kind of give you a sense of community. That’s been kind of hard to achieve this year”

“Hand sanitizer, facemasks, which are good cause I’m always losing mine. But having access to a real bathroom with real hot water and like an actual mirror. At the beginning of the COVID thing, I went for a couple months without seeing myself in a mirror... and there was the mirror and i was like ‘Whoa.’ I actually asked for a minute alone so I could just look at myself. It was kind of a powerful moment. Like wow a mirror. This is what I look like. I looked like I aged like 10 years in three months.”

Hand Washing Stations

“Cleanliness is one of the things that brings us closer to our own humanity, and losing access to that is just another aspect of the qualities of life that separate us and make us human beings.”

“It takes a ton of time just to find access to running water to wash their hands. If you get sick, if you drink the wrong kind of water and then you have gastrointestinal distress and you need to go urgently, then you have fecal matter on your hands and then you have to walk a mile to try to find somewhere to wash your hands, its just out of the question.”

“Folks understand that not having access to running water, not being able to wash yourself, wash your hands, it’s a public safety and a public health issue, which is arguably the most important part of this, but a close second, if not equally important is the fact that it ties you to your community.”

“Having amenities that most don’t really think about, like access to washing your hands, it makes such a difference. The difference it makes to have folks know that people in this city do care, and want to help and find ways to help.”

“Thank you so much for putting this in, it’s impossible to find water out here. Look at my hands, they’re filthy. I’m 63 years old tomorrow, I have chronic hip pain, I can’t walk around trying to find a place to wash my hands. It’s really important.”

“This is amazing. People around here could really use this. Nowhere around here will even let us fill up water bottles.”

“People treat you like you don’t exist. There’s so many spigots around town on businesses that aren’t being used ever, but if I try to use it, I’ll get arrested. These [handwashing] stations are awesome. It helps knowing people are trying to look out for us.”

“People out here are stressed, they’re tired and hungry and it’s easy for people not to feel grateful. I just wanted you to know that we are grateful, and that we really appreciate you guys coming out here and trying to make sure we have water to wash ourselves.”

“I’ve been in Portland since 1976, back when the Blazers were good. This city, man, sometimes it feels like no one cares about us at all. We get treated like we’re not human. I really appreciate the work you guys are doing, seriously.”

“Having you guys come out here and helping us out, not just the water but like helping us with food, keeping us informed, it’s like having our own superheroes in the city, yanno?”

“I have a hard time relying on other people, and sometimes being around other people, but I wanna tell you that this shit helps a lot. I’m living in this car, no place to shower, no comfortable place to sleep, hungry all the time, dirty all the time. This shit helps a lot.”

“We want to show that we can take care of these stations. It means a lot seeing someone trying to help us out in this situation... We know this one thing can be here for a long time if we take care of it. Most of us know that... It’s what I tell my kids, something that is a little gesture to you can mean so much to someone else.”

“People don’t realize it, it’s gross. You go a few weeks without running water and talk to me. There’s only so much alcohol wipes can do.”

“How are you supposed to stop being homeless, how are you supposed to get a job? You can’t even wash your hands, you can’t wash your hair, you smell!”

“These handwashing stations, you don’t know how much they help.”

“Oh my God, a handwashing station would be amazing. A shower would also be amazing. Us guys, you know, it’s easier to stay clean enough and healthy in our body, but we need them especially for the women around here. It can be a lot harder for them, you know?”

Forced Evictions and the Housing Crisis

“[Sweeps are] not about the unhoused’s best interests, it’s not about public health, it’s about aesthetics, and having the failings of our city pushed to the dark recesses where they can’t be seen”

“This is a person who is trying, trying to get his life figured out, is trying to make some money, is trying to move up and get to somewhere else, and you just can’t do that when every few weeks everything is shuffled around and you have to completely uproot your life and move around

“When two people get housed, two people get unhoused.”



watersheds@b-e-f.org