KEEP WASHING YOUR HANDS – BUT WHERE?
IT’S TIME FOR A 2020 CIVILIAN CONSERVATION CORPS
TO REBUILD OUR NATION’S PUBLIC RESTROOMS

Kathryn H. Anthony, Ph.D.

The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened awareness of public health and safety, especially the need to wear a mask, keep at least six feet apart whenever possible, and wash your hands several times a day for at least 20 seconds, the time it takes to sing “Happy Birthday to You” – twice. While using our private bathrooms in the comfort of our own homes, it is easy to sing a happy song.

But now that the nation has reopened, where else can we wash our hands? Our re-emergence during this pandemic shines a spotlight on a problem that has been swept under the rug for too long: our nation’s public restrooms.

Ten years ago I testified before the US House of Representatives Committee on Oversight and Government Reform about an issue “near and dear to the hearts and bladders of women and children all across the United States, one that is long overdue:” the prevalent problem of long lines for ladies’ rooms and the need for greater potty parity, equal speed of access for toilets for males and females. I argued then, as I do today, that for millions of people around the world, boys and girls, men and women of all ages, especially pregnant and menstruating women, and whether you are Democrat, Republican, or Green, using public restrooms is no laughing matter.

The average person uses a toilet about six to eight times a day, as many as 2,920 times per year. By age 80 we will have taken 200,000 trips to the toilet and spent two years of our life in restrooms.

At the height of the COVID-19 lockdown, the vast majority of shops, restaurants, and hotels whose toilets we have been accustomed to using while on the go were closed. Finding restrooms became near impossible. Yet well before this pandemic, public restrooms in the US have long presented pressing public health problems.

The US currently has over 130,000 K-12 schools and over 50 million students. Soon schools will re-open. Sadly, millions of students, staff and teachers will return to schools with dysfunctional, dirty toilets, missing toilet paper, broken sinks and mirrors. In far too many K-12 schools across the country, public restrooms are in such deplorable condition that many students spend their entire school day “holding it in,” avoiding the restroom altogether. Especially for women and girls, this practice can lead to urinary tract infections and other health problems. Menstruating women have no choice but to use their school restroom; they desperately need toilet paper, working sinks, soap, and dryers. And how can students spend 20
seconds washing their hands when soap dispensers are empty, broken, or ripped out of the walls?

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (Public Law 111-296) requires every school district in the US to have a school wellness policy, a written document that serves as a guide to create supportive school nutrition, physical activity environments, and other school-based activities. Yet where are school restrooms in these policies? Usually absent, and with a failing grade.

Especially now, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, school administrators and our state and local officials can no longer ignore this crisis, another potential disaster in the making. Parents must rest assured that children can urinate, defecate, menstruate, and wash and dry their hands properly while in school, using restrooms that meet standards of good hygiene.

Similar dire situations can be found in public restrooms throughout many of our nation’s city parks and recreation facilities as well as public transit stations. Here, too, people of all ages, especially families with small children, deserve to answer nature’s call in a clean and safe environment. Yet today far too many of these restrooms provide the only refuge possible for the local homeless population and drug dealers. Without funds to maintain them, they have become the restrooms of last resort for everyone else – dangerous, decrepit dungeons that we try to avoid at all costs.

As shopping malls re-opened for business, in order to comply with new social distancing guidelines, some mall managers have altered their restrooms by taping off every other sink. But in reality, how does this work? Reducing fixtures by half results in potentially much greater crowding in the tightly enclosed space that remains. And now that most of us are taking longer than ever before to wash our hands, with half the sinks out of commission, waiting for a spare sink causes even greater congestion and higher risk of transmitting the deadly virus.

For the past two decades, The World Toilet Organization (WTO) and its founder, Singaporean social entrepreneur Jack Sim, have called for world leaders to make sanitation a greater priority. In 2013, WTO’S efforts led to a resolution “Sanitation for All” co-sponsored and adopted by 122 countries at the United Nations General Assembly. The UN officially declared November 19 each year as World Toilet Day.

For over 15 years, the American Restroom Association, a small all-volunteer organization has advocated for clean, safe, well-designed, accessible public restrooms. Some of us teach, publish books and articles, deliver presentations at TED talks and international conferences, while others are on the front lines working together with school districts, parks and recreation departments, architects and building code officials to advocate for new and improved restrooms across the USA.

Tom Keating has spent over 25 years advocating for cleaner, safer public restrooms in K-12 schools in several states and countries. Through his initiative, Project CLEAN (Citizens, Learners and Educators Against Neglect), Keating has worked together with school administrators,
teachers, custodial staff, students, and community members to develop best practices where school restrooms serve as wellness spaces to promote better health for all.

Steven Soifer has long advocated for public restrooms that provide greater privacy, especially those with shy bladder syndrome, or paruresis. His TED talk describes the significance of this problem and its large-scale debilitating impact. His efforts, along with those of Bruce Pitts, helped convince officials to revise building codes to finally require partitions between urinals.

Citizen activist Mary Coakley Munk, together with architects Don Goertz and the late Dale Naegle, designed two sets of award-winning safe, clean, and accessible open-air gender-neutral restrooms that are available 24/7 along La Jolla Shores, one of San Diego’s most beautiful beaches, accommodating two to three million visitors a year. Their design currently serves as a model for the City of San Diego Parks and Recreation Department as its leadership seeks to renovate and replace outdated, problem-plagued restrooms across the region.

The current trend towards more free-standing, gender-neutral restrooms provides far greater safety and privacy than the typical gang-style men’s or women’s restroom. The La Jolla Shores restrooms can serve as best-practice designs for public restrooms across the US.

Gender-neutral restrooms occupy minimal space with maximum benefit. Updated construction specifications can ensure that at least in new construction or renovation projects, soap dispensers can be mounted from the back of the wall and cannot be yanked off. Securing soap dispensers and keeping them fully stocked in public restrooms everywhere, along with an abundance of touch-free features, should be a top priority.

Now is the time for some of those billions of economic stimulus dollars to be used to improve sanitation, rebuild our nation’s public restrooms, and help minimize the spread of infectious diseases. In the spirit of FDR’s New Deal that provided jobs to approximately 300,000 workers during the Great Depression, a new 2020 Civilian Conservation Corps could hire a large workforce of those currently unemployed to quickly rebuild this most important aspect of our nation’s infrastructure. Bring us up to the standards found in Japan, where clean, safe, available public restrooms are plentiful – a symbol of a civilized society.

Let’s use this global public health emergency to focus like a laser beam on this pressing national problem and create safer spaces for all of us during COVID-19 and beyond.

**

_Kathryn H. Anthony, Ph.D., is ACSA Distinguished Professor at the School of Architecture, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the author of five books including Defined by Design: The Surprising Power of Hidden Gender, Age, and Body Bias in Everyday Products and Places (Prometheus Books 2017), and over 100 publications. She currently serves as Vice President of the American Restroom Association._
Gender-neutral restrooms at La Jolla Shores, La Jolla, California.