

Dear Supervisor,

The ISDF coalition is committed to bringing forward policies that center the voices and needs of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) while promoting health equity and creating accessible programs and services for unsheltered residents, immigrants, and families with low incomes. ISDF partners including Planned Parenthood Action Fund of the Pacific Southwest, and San Diego Organizing Project (SDOP) have been working with Think Dignity and San Diego State University (SDSU) Associate Professor Megan Welsh Carroll to develop recommendations to improve public bathroom access in San Diego County.

Historically, access to public bathrooms has been a major infrastructure challenge and public health hazard. Since 2000, four grand jury reports have sounded the alarm on the potential of public health outbreaks due to limited access to public bathrooms. In 2017 a hepatitis A outbreak in San Diego County resulted in the deaths of 20 people. The San Diego County government spent over \$3 million addressing this public health emergency¹ In 2018, the San Diego Tribune reported that the overall cost to fight the outbreak was \$12 million.² Other government expenditures, such as street clean-up and installing temporary portable bathrooms, have cost the city and county millions of dollars over the past decade.

In addition to being a public health threat, lack of public bathroom facilities has led to the criminalization of unsheltered communities who are unable to use the bathroom with privacy and dignity. In 2020 Jesse Evans, an unsheltered Black man, was assaulted and arrested by the San Diego Police Department after being accused of urinating in public. In a statement issued by the office of City Attorney Mara Elliot, she noted *“Our city’s resources could better be used to provide public restrooms.”*³

Think Dignity has been a leading voice and advocate for the expansion of public bathroom facilities and a champion for the rights and living conditions of unsheltered people. Additionally, SDOP has led local efforts to rebuild and replenish bathrooms in the city of San Diego. Professor

¹ County has spent \$3 million on hepatitis A crisis so far - The San Diego Union-Tribune (<https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/data-watch/sd-me-hepatitis-costs-20171009-story.html>)

² San Diego hepatitis A outbreak ends after 2 years - AP News (<https://apnews.com/article/cc40b8c476ef469ebdc2228772176b03>)

³ City Attorney Declines to Charge Homeless Black Man Beaten by Cops in La Jolla - Times of San Diego (<https://timesofsandiego.com/crime/2021/06/11/city-attorney-declines-to-charge-homeless-black-man-beaten-by-cops-in-la-jolla/>)

⁴ Dehaven, J. (2017, September 20). San Diego officials were warned about restroom shortage repeatedly before the hepatitis outbreak. *San Diego Union-Tribune*, <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/watchdog/sd-me-grand-jury-20170920-story.html>
Carroll, M.W., Swayne, M., Rios, A., & O'Donnell, R. (2022, March). Public restrooms in San Diego: A regional assessment. <https://bathrooms.sdsu.edu/publications/>

Welsh Carroll has worked with Think Dignity and SDSU colleagues to develop a protocol for compiling a database of all built public restrooms in San Diego County.

Now, thanks to a recently-released report from SDSU's Project for Sanitation Justice, run by Dr. Welsh Carroll, we have a Countywide database. In the project's first report,⁴ released this month, the team documents their work developing a first-of-its-kind database of all permanent public bathroom facilities in our county, including all 18 municipalities, the County's unincorporated areas, and the Port of San Diego. They identify 669 facilities, and develop a publicly-accessible [spatial map of these data points](#). In mapping these facilities by census tract, the team finds that an astonishing 49% of San Diego census tracts have zero permanent public restroom facilities. These 308 census tracts with zero facilities are home to 1,457,384 people – about 40% of the County's total population. In future reports, Dr. Welsh Carroll and her team will identify specific areas of need – but it is already clear that by any metric, the lack of public restrooms is a County-wide issue in dire need of attention.

We, who have signed this letter, believe that access to public bathrooms is a human right and the County must prioritize this in the current fiscal planning. The County must also work with the City of San Diego, the County's 18 other municipalities, North County Transit, MTS, SANDAG, and the Port Authority to address the safety, availability, and cleanliness of the bathrooms. As our County and cities become more populated, it is vital to provide accessible public bathrooms for our residents and the people who travel to our community as both a matter of public health and equity.

A lack of bathrooms impacts the health of workers, poses unnecessary challenges for families who cannot access diaper changing stations, and also harms our unsheltered neighbors and puts them in dangerous predicaments when they are not able to use basic facilities privately, with dignity, and in a safe environment. Lack of accessible bathrooms also creates barriers for people with disabilities. This harms our collective public health when preventable infectious disease outbreaks occur, as has happened twice in the past five years. The County has the resources to bring forward short-term and long-term policy changes to improve the conditions of the bathrooms.

This year, we'd like to bring forward the following recommendations:

In the short term, we'd like to ask for the following in this fiscal year planning budget cycle:

- Create a \$30 million fund available to municipalities within the County for the creation of public bathroom facilities.
- Provide safe needle deposit boxes in all County-owned and operated public bathrooms.

- Create diaper changing stations in all County-owned and operated public bathrooms.
- Provide free menstrual products in County-owned and operated bathroom facilities.
- For frequently utilized public bathrooms:
 - Extend hours of operations, including 24/7 access in densely populated areas.
 - Install shower stalls.
 - Install permanent handwashing sinks.
 - Include all-gender bathrooms during renovation of existing bathrooms
- Expand information on the County website regarding public bathrooms:
 - Post all bathroom locations, including hours of operation.
 - Allow the public to submit maintenance requests, feedback on cleanliness, and requests for materials (ex: toilet paper, soap, etc.) for each bathroom location.
- Post clear signage in multiple languages around and leading to all public bathroom locations
- Identify bathrooms that are not ADA compliant
- Build all-gender bathrooms in unincorporated areas that have few to no available public bathrooms.
- Identify bathrooms that are all-gender
- Abide by state law requiring single-stall restrooms to be identified as all-gender restrooms”
- Ensure sanitation and custodial workers responsible for maintaining the bathrooms are paid a living wage.

In the long term, we are advocating for the following to be achieved:

- Renovate existing bathrooms to ensure they are ADA compliant and include all-gender bathrooms.
- Build bathrooms in County areas and communities where there are zero bathroom facilities.
- Create shower stalls and permanent handwashing stations in population-dense areas of the County.
- Ensure sanitation and custodial workers responsible for maintaining the bathrooms are paid a living wage.
- Install bidets in County-owned and operated bathrooms.

We, the community partners, public health, nonprofit leaders, and academic professionals signed onto this letter, are urging you to prioritize increasing access to public bathrooms.

Thank you,

Invest in San Diego Families Coalition