

# FLUSHING INEQUALITY

## AN ASSESSMENT OF AVAILABILITY, ACCESSIBILITY AND QUALITY OF PUBLIC TOILETS IN THE CITY OF OTTAWA

The *Flushing Inequality* research project presents the findings of a quantitative study conducted by Carleton University Master of Social Work students to assess the availability, quality and accessibility of public toilets owned, operated and maintained by the City of Ottawa. This research was commissioned by the GottaGo! Campaign, a committee of active citizens advocating for a network of safe, accessible, free and clean public toilets in parks, major transit stops and key public places in Ottawa.

Using feedback from an advisory committee of community members, the researchers created a comprehensive visual assessment tool to assess the availability, accessibility and quality criteria of a sample of 92 public toilets owned, operated and maintained by the City of Ottawa. The surveys were conducted between December 2015 and February 2016 by a team of five graduate social work students, including Victoria Roberts, Isabeau Welter and Fireda Ahmed.<sup>1</sup>

An advisory committee comprised of social work educators, senior citizens, retired engineers, an individual with a physical disability, and representatives from Crohn's and Colitis Canada provided input into the design of a visual assessment tool consisting of 47 indicators of availability, accessibility and quality. Availability indicators assessed the seasons or times of operation, if the toilet was well-marked and located in proximity to public transit, and located in areas accessible to the public without requiring permission or assistance. Accessibility indicators assessed if the public toilet is designed and located to ensure safe and equitable access for all service-users, using the Ontario Building Code to determine physical accessibility, as well as staff monitoring and the provision of gender neutral facilities for social accessibility and safety. Public toilet quality was assessed based on whether the facility was clean, well-lit, well-maintained, stocked with supplies, and equipped with diaper change tables in all genders of washrooms. To ensure consistency of responses, the research team visited all facilities in pairs during standard hours of operation, Monday to Saturday between 9:00 am and 5:00 pm. Due to limited accessibility of public toilets during the winter months, when the research team was unable to gain entry to a facility during the hours of operation, the availability criteria was assessed for the location and the researchers noted that the facility was unavailable for assessment of accessibility and quality criteria.

Despite being the nation's capital, to date there has been no systematic examination of the availability, accessibility and quality of public toilets in Ottawa. Concerns articulated by service users in the 2014 study *Talking Toilets: Assessing the Accessibility of Public Toilet Provision in Ottawa, Ontario* concluded that there is a sense of dissatisfaction among service users regarding the current state of public toilet infrastructure in Ottawa (see [www.ottawapublictoilets.ca](http://www.ottawapublictoilets.ca)). *Flushing Inequality* provides further research to identify gaps in public toilet provision and provide recommendations to the City of Ottawa.

### KEY FINDINGS

- **While 82% of public toilets in the City of Ottawa are equipped with sanitary waste disposal units, only 4% are equipped with biohazard waste disposal units.**  
While sanitary waste disposal units have become a standard feature in public toilets to ensure the safe disposal of feminine hygiene products, the same standard has not been established for the disposal of biohazard, biochemical or infectious waste, such as syringes used to inject medicinal and non-medicinal substances. This exposes an important gap in the safety and quality of public toilets in the City of Ottawa.
- **63% of public toilets in the City of Ottawa deemed to be “wheelchair accessible” pose at least one**

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<sup>1</sup> The other two researchers asked to be anonymous due to the risk of their work with the city being compromised.

### **accessibility barrier to service users with mobility challenges.**

Despite being labelled “wheelchair accessible”, only 82% had toilets that were the appropriate height (between 40 and 46 cm) for individuals in wheelchairs to easily transfer to and from their mobility device; only 80% had grab bars in the wheelchair accessible stall that met the Ontario Building Code minimum length of 76 cm; 89% of the wheelchair accessible units had a stall door that met or exceeded the minimum width requirement of 85 cm; 82% of the doors were equipped with an automatic push door opener or a push bar to allow people using mobility devices to easily enter or exit the unit; and only 54% of the wheelchair accessible public toilet units met the minimum dimensions for manoeuvrability, 150 cm by 160 cm. This data reinforces the discrepancies that exist between bathrooms designated to be “wheelchair accessible” and their actual functional accessibility for people using mobility devices.

- **Only 21% of public toilets in the City of Ottawa are equipped with a gender neutral or family facility.** It is evident that there is an overwhelming lack of gender neutral and family washroom facilities provided in the City of Ottawa, and that facilities are more likely to provide sex-segregated public toilets. This poses a barrier to the physical and psychological wellbeing of queer and transgender people, as well as caregivers who are assisting individuals to use the bathroom.
- **Although assessed during standard operating hours on weekends and weekdays, at time of survey, 45% of the City of Ottawa public toilets were unavailable for access, either due to seasonal or daily closures.**

Although a geomatics researcher working with GottaGo! plotted over 400 City of Ottawa owned and operated public toilets in the City of Ottawa located in community centres, recreational facilities, comfort stations, administrative buildings, libraries and museums, the seasonal and hourly closures of many of these locations restrict the public toilet’s availability, thus rendering many facilities unusable. With the exception of public toilets located in revenue-generating properties, like recreation facilities, many public toilets were restricted seasonally or were open only during daytime hours. Toilets in comfort stations were almost universally inaccessible during the data collection period. Likewise, many library and museum facilities had limited hours of operation, though they were open year-round, while many community centres outside of the City of Ottawa’s urban core, in suburban and rural regions, were unavailable to the public unless the facility was rented by a community group.

- **Among public toilets located within 100 metres of a transit stop, 25% of these public toilets were closed to the public at the time of survey.** This finding reveals the need to ensure public transit facilities are located within a reasonable distance from public toilet facilities. According to earlier research conducted for the GottaGo! Campaign, 100% of community members surveyed indicated that they would be more likely to use public transit to commute if there were more public toilets available in the City of Ottawa.
- **85% of public toilets lacked signage outside of the facility to indicate presence of a public toilet.** City of Ottawa facilities such as museums, libraries, community centres, administrative buildings and recreational facilities that house public toilets are seldom clearly marked as public toilet facilities outside of the building. When toilets are not easily identifiable, service may resort to using private establishments, though not all populations have the privilege of doing so. Others may adjust their social behaviour to avoid participation in community activities, limiting their excursions to short trips, or even remaining entirely housebound in order to avoid facing the humiliation of an accident in public. These forced lifestyle changes restrict the ability of the elderly and people with chronic health conditions to participate fully in their communities, thus contributing to the ongoing marginalization of vulnerable populations, by increasing their risk of social isolation, and exacerbating feelings of anxiety and distress.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE CITY OF OTTAWA**

The *Flushing Inequality* research project advocates that everyone, regardless of age, ability, health condition, gender, or class, deserves to use the bathroom in a way that respects their dignity. This entails ensuring that public toilets are not spaces reserved exclusively for those deemed to be “deserving”. As such, we propose the following recommendations to the City of Ottawa:

- **Provide public access to family and gender neutral facilities.**

Family and gender neutral facilities were often locked to the public, when sex-segregated bathrooms were not. Leaving gender neutral and family public toilets open reduces intangible barriers to social accessibility that serve to impede the ability of families, caregivers and their relatives or clients, and transgender people from partaking in community life without risking their safety, facing stigma or harassment for doing so.

- **Establish an advisory committee of individuals of different abilities to provide recommendations for public toilet accessibility.**

The advisory committee provides recommendations for facility design and renovations of existing facilities to ensure City of Ottawa public toilets are inclusive and functionally accessible for people with a range of abilities.

- **Equip current public toilet infrastructure with outdoor signage.**

Currently, many residents in the City of Ottawa rely heavily on private establishments to meet their toileting needs. Facilities should be equipped with clear outdoor signage with standard symbols to indicate presence of a public toilets City of Ottawa libraries, athletics and recreation facilities, museums and other administrative buildings.

- **Ensure that facilities near transit stops are made available to the public and that forthcoming transit stations be equipped with accessible and free public toilets.**

A strong public toilet strategy would complement the City of Ottawa's current sustainability plan by shifting service users away from driving as a means of commute toward more sustainable methods of travel.

- **Devise strategies to ensure that public toilet facilities are open and available for public access year-round.**

While sufficient public toilet infrastructure does exist in the City of Ottawa, the seasonal and hourly closures of these locations restrict the public toilet's availability to service users, thus rendering many facilities unusable.

Existing public toilets should be opened to service users so as to ensure their toilet needs are met by the City of Ottawa.

## **SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS**

This research explores the way in which public toilet provision in the City of Ottawa reinforces obstacles that individuals face, further marginalizing groups such as the elderly, people with disabilities, people with chronic health conditions, women, transgender people, and people who are experiencing homelessness.

The findings of this research study reveal that City of Ottawa public toilets present as overall quality facilities, with most public toilets meeting almost all quality criteria. Moreover, nearly all City of Ottawa public toilets surveyed were equipped with at least one unit or stall designated as wheelchair accessible, however further investigation revealed that a significant proportion of City of Ottawa public toilets present at least one barrier to full access for service users with disabilities. Lastly, the findings revealed that almost half of the public toilets surveyed were closed, rendering them unavailable for full assessment by the research team. The restricted availability of the public toilet facilities prevents the current public toilet infrastructure in the City of Ottawa from meeting the needs of all service users.

As a city that is recognized as a year-round tourist destination, boasting a population in excess of one million people, it is critical to consider how the current state of public toilets reflects the willingness of the City of Ottawa to meet the needs of the most marginalized populations in our community. We pride ourselves on being an inclusive and accessible city, are our public toilets telling a different story?

## **MORE INFORMATION**

To read the full report, click [here](#). For questions, contact MSW researcher Victoria Roberts via email at [tori.roberts@carleton.ca](mailto:tori.roberts@carleton.ca).

