



While Miami tries to end protection of homeless from police, city debuts public toilet

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Cassandra Strozier waved her hand as she scanned downtown Miami, gesturing toward the streets she used to sleep on.

The 54-year-old explained her effort to end her homelessness, a goal frustrated by her trouble finding someone who would employ her after she got out of prison.

“Everywhere I go, nobody gives me a job,” she said, her eyes welling up.

But on Wednesday, she wiped her eyes and worked. She wore a goldenrod shirt and black hat emblazoned with “Dwntwn Miami” as she stood outside a new freestanding bathroom stall near the Main Library, at the corner of West Flagler Street and Northwest First Avenue.

The \$312,976 structure, built primarily to cater to downtown's homeless population, includes a toilet, hand-washing station and needle disposal. The bathroom will be open from 8:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m.

Strozier, an attendant at downtown's first standalone restroom, was hired through an employment program funded by the Downtown Development Authority, a semi-autonomous tax-funded agency with a mission to encourage economic growth in downtown Miami. She's one of about 40 homeless people currently employed by the program, which hires from the homeless population for beautification jobs such as picking up litter, cleaning graffiti, pulling weeds and other landscaping work.

"I'm happy to be working," she said.



Cassandra Strozier, 54, who was once homeless, is now gainfully employed as an attendant who helps operate and clean the first downtown public restroom near the entrance to Miami-Dade Main Library.

At a ribbon-cutting Wednesday morning, commissioners and businesspeople touted the restroom as a step toward addressing Miami's homelessness problems. Yet, as politicians glad-handed and posed for photos, the city of Miami is trying to eliminate longstanding protections meant to [keep the police from arresting the homeless for sleeping on the sidewalk](#).

With unanimous support from Miami's City Commission and Mayor Francis Suarez, the city's attorneys will soon try to convince a federal judge to abolish the Pottinger agreement, a 1998 consent decree that prevents police within Miami city limits from arresting homeless people for "life-sustaining" activities such as sleeping on the sidewalk, urinating in public and starting a cooking fire.

The agreement was the result of a class-action lawsuit filed by 5,000 homeless people and the American Civil Liberties Union against the city in the early 1990s. Lawyers volunteering for the ACLU argued that it was unconstitutional for Miami police to arrest the homeless for loitering.

Years of litigation resulted in the consent decree, which has defined how the police interact with Miami's homeless for 20 years. In May, all five city commissioners voted to take the decree back to federal court in order to dissolve the agreement altogether or weaken the restrictions it places on police. In the city's motion, Miami's attorneys take the position that the agreement actually hinders the government's ability to help the homeless, because it "restricts the city from offering shelter beds that are available outside of the city of Miami."

ACLU lawyers and homeless advocates disagree. They contend that police overstepped the boundaries created by the Pottinger agreement during incidents earlier this year when city employees chased homeless people away from public areas and destroyed their property. In one case cited by the ACLU, a woman arrested for obstructing the sidewalk later died in custody. Activists believe she died because she [did not receive proper medical attention while under arrest](#).

A federal judge will consider the matter next week.

On Wednesday, Suarez and Commissioner Ken Russell, whose district includes downtown, said the opening of the restroom is an example of the the city's compassionate approach to the homeless — an attitude far different from the way police harassed people on the street 20 years ago.

"We're doubling down on our commitment to the residents, the businesses and the homeless," Russell told the Miami Herald.



After the ribbon-cutting on Wednesday, Sept. 19, 2018, Mayor Francis Suarez, left, shares in the accomplishment of the grand opening of the first downtown public restroom near the entrance to Miami-Dade Main Library with Cassandra Strozier, 54, right, who was once homeless, and now is gainfully employed as an attendant who helps operate and clean the facility.

On Wednesday, Sept. 19, 2018, Miami opened the first-of-its-kind downtown public restroom near the entrance to Miami-Dade Main Library. The restroom will be operated by former members of the homeless community as a source of gainful employment.

Russell added that the employment program has expanded to the Omni Community Redevelopment Agency and he wants to run it across the city. He has requested funding for it in next year's city

budget, which commissioners will consider for a final vote Sept. 27.

Money from the mayor's office funded the project, which was conceived under former Mayor Tomás Regalado and completed under Suarez.

The restroom helps people who in the past had fewer place to relieve themselves. The lack of options has been well-documented in recent years, including a "poop map" created by the downtown authority that documented human feces and urine found in public around downtown. A pilot portable toilet program was deemed successful in attracting more than 100 flushes a day and keeping the streets cleaner, so much so that officials moved forward with the permanent restroom. Construction on the permanent toilet began in April.

On Wednesday, Strozier applauded the facility for giving people without a home — people she still interacts with all the time — a bit more dignity. She's happy to be working as the restroom's monitor, making sure people don't stay in for more than five minutes and cleaning it after each use.

But she's also hunting for a second job. Another income will help her get out of the shelter.

"I'm trying to save so I can get my own apartment," she said.