

Mobilizing a Community-Academic Partnership to Provide DIY Handwashing Stations to Skid Row Residents During COVID-19

Graham DiGuseppi, Callahan Corcoran, Todd Cunningham, Hoan Nguyen, Monique Noel, Pete White, and François Bar

INTRODUCTION

People experiencing homelessness are disproportionately more likely to have pre-existing health conditions and lack access to sanitary practices, such as handwashing, than housed people. These disparities make people experiencing homelessness more vulnerable to the coronavirus (COVID-19). Los Angeles’s Skid Row neighborhood, home to over 5,000 unhoused individuals, faces a shortage of health and social services, which places this population further at risk.

An academic-community partnership, which brought together students and faculty from the University of Southern California (USC) and members of the Los Angeles Community Action Network (LA CAN), collaborated to build and distribute 16 handwashing stations. These stations help improve sanitary practices in Skid Row and might help slow the spread of COVID-19.

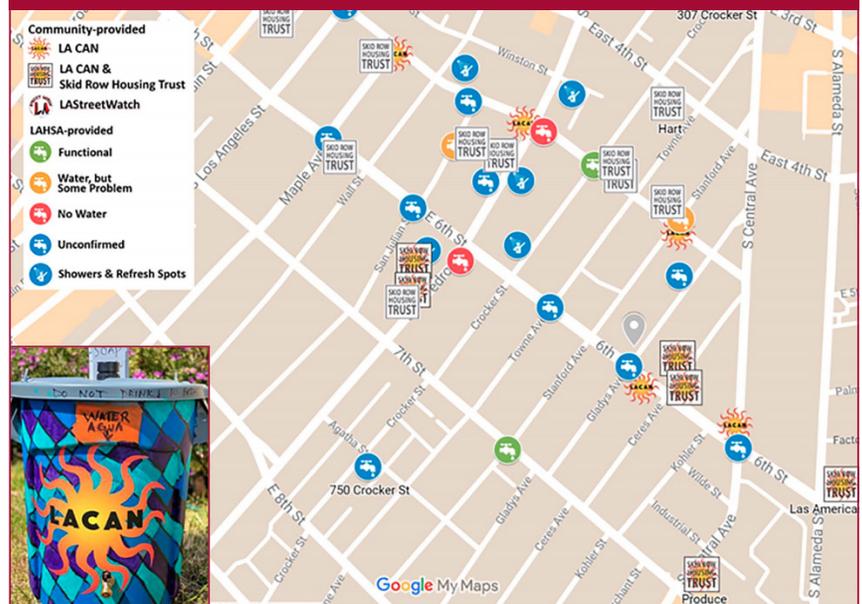
METHODS

During March 2020, USC and LA CAN began building handwashing stations for Skid Row residents using the following approach:

- Collaborating with do-it-yourself (DIY) makers, artists, and Skid Row residents, the collaborative group built a prototype using a trash can, brass spigot, and soap holder.
- With \$10,000 raised from a Facebook fundraiser, the group launched five handwashing stations. Skid Row residents were paid using these funds to manage the stations.

The collaborative also developed a crowd-sourced map tracking the location of the handwashing stations they installed, as well as those installed by Skid Row Housing Trust and the City of LA. Finally, they engaged in advocacy through sending an open letter to Mayor Garcetti that requested greater collaboration to meet the homeless community’s health needs.

FIGURE 1: COMMUNITY MAPPING OF HANDWASHING STATIONS IN SKID ROW (Skid Row Power, n.d. -c)



Note: LA CAN = Los Angeles Community Action Network; LAHSA = Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority

Anecdotal reports from social media show that Skid Row residents welcome and use the stations.

FINDINGS

- Station attendants are crucial to upkeeping the stations and explaining how to use them.
- Decorating the stations with art has encouraged use, and builds connections between artists, community members, and members of the research team.
- Co-equal partnerships between universities, organizations, and community members thrive. By utilizing everyone's unique talents, resources, and connections, the team quickly and effectively responded to this urgent problem.

NEXT STEPS

- There is only anecdotal evidence of the program's effectiveness, so the team must engage in further research to evaluate the community response, station usage, and health outcomes among Skid Row residents.
- To support further efforts, the collaborative must gather additional funding and public support to increase the number of handwashing stations.
- More generally, there is a need to increase public awareness regarding the health needs of people experiencing homelessness. Increased awareness will put more pressure on local governments to ensure the needs of this community are met.

