

Silicon Valley water district helps the homeless and environment



by [Annalise Freimarck](#) August 26, 2023



Geraldo Garcia and Graciela Haio collect their belongings amid flood threats as they scramble to find shelter in early January 2023. Photo by Jana Kadah.

Valley Water is introducing two new approaches to combating pollution created by homeless encampments near creeks—portable toilets and debit cards.

The water district announced earlier this week that it will place portable toilets and wash stations at 20 key sites near [homeless encampments](#) along the creeks through an initiative called the Portable Toilet Facilities Program. It also announced a plan called Clean Camps, Clean Creeks, where it will incentivize homeless people to keep tidy camps by handing out debit cards.

The portable toilets program is funded through a \$2.2 million grant awarded to the district on June 28 by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, while the debit cards will be funded through the district's Safe, Clean Water and Good Neighbor encampment cleanup programs. The grant will also fund encampment cleanups.

Valley Water owns and manages approximately 294 miles of streams and habitat. Officials said 2,300 people currently live on district property, often in encampments near waterways, which can be dangerous [due to flash flooding](#), among other factors. Human waste and other debris from encampments can lead to degraded water quality and habitats for animals.

Jennifer Codianne, deputy operating officer of Valley Water, is in charge of the programs and believes they will help keep creeks clean throughout Santa Clara County.

"The important thing to us as a water district is to ensure that there's a reduced amount of trash entering the waterway," she told San José Spotlight.

During the last fiscal year, Valley Water cleaned up 2.7 million pounds of trash, according to a news release.

Last year, approximately [77% of local homeless residents](#) were unsheltered, meaning they lived outdoors, on the street or [in vehicles](#), according to homeless nonprofit Destination: Home.

Valley Water has begun placing portable toilets and wash stations throughout the 20 locations it pinpointed as having the most encampments, as well as cleanup needs. Codianne said the district's goal by the end of the month is to have all portable sanitation stations in use to reduce bio-waste flowing into waterways.

Todd Langton, executive director of homeless nonprofit Agape Silicon Valley and founder of the Coalition for the Unhoused of Silicon Valley, said he supports Valley Water's effort to provide sanitary necessities to homeless residents.

"I just think the general public needs to be reminded (what) their life would be like if they did not have access to toilets and wash stations," he told San José Spotlight. "Pretty soon it starts to not only affect your physical (health), but also your mental well-being."

The debit card program is expected to start in the next few months, and will encourage unhoused people to bag up their trash for removal.

The program is based on other trash cleanup programs in cities throughout the state, like San Jose's Trash for Cash, which [expanded in 2021](#). The value of the debit card hasn't been decided yet, but those who have clean camps will receive the cards.

An additional \$900,000 grant from the EPA will go toward addressing environmental impacts at Coyote Creek, where Valley Water spent [millions of dollars](#) to clear encampments in April.

Jim Beall, Valley Water board member and longtime South Bay political leader, said both of the programs are part of a proactive approach the district is taking to not only combat pollutants in waterways, but also to find housing for the homeless population. The district [sponsored AB 1469](#) in May, which would allow it to play a more active role in helping the unhoused community.

"We created a different approach to just repeatedly cleaning up trash," Beall told San José Spotlight.

Langton said he supports Valley Water's efforts to help keep the creeks clean and aid the homeless community at the same time, but he wants to make sure it continues to do it humanely.

"Valley Water needs to monitor and work side by side (with contractors and the police) and make sure that they are treating the unhoused with dignity and respect if and when they do need to abate," he said.

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