



Public Hygiene Lets Us Stay Human

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Subject: Update to Emergency Sanitation Instructions for Seattleites

An Open Letter to Officials of King County and City of Seattle,

On this occasion of [World Toilet Day](#) November 19th, we respectfully ask that you provide clear emergency sanitation instructions for the people of King County given the high likelihood that water and sewer systems will be destroyed in an earthquake. Providing revised instructions will help avoid a public health debacle, and better prepare families in the event of long-term recovery time.

We appreciate that the [Public Health Department of Seattle](#) and [King County](#) acknowledge that a Cascadia Subduction Zone or other severe earthquake is likely to damage water and sewer systems. [How to create an emergency toilet](#) describes various toilet types and sensibly recommends locating them away from kitchen and dining areas. However, specifying a location 100 feet downhill from "any drinking water source (well or spring), home, apartment, or campsite" is hardly feasible in densely populated vertical neighborhoods. For residents who are sheltering in place, the Department recommends using plastic garbage bags to "convert a flush toilet or make an emergency toilet from a pail". We are concerned that among safe disposal options listed are burial on one's property, or the inclusion of toilet bags with regular garbage, in the case of a declared emergency when an announcement is made to this effect. The mixing of identically bagged infectious and solid waste would put public health at risk. Moreover, the shaking and liquefaction that destroys sewers may also make streets impassable to garbage trucks.

Kindly note that the [City of Portland Bureau of Emergency Management](#) offers households simple instructions for a [Twin Bucket Emergency Toilet](#) as well as sound post-disaster sanitation guidelines. Three practical principles of ecological sanitation apply: 1) waterless containerization, 2) urine separation, and 3) long-term composting. Households have on hand 2 to 4 buckets of 5-7 gal capacity (routinely discarded by supermarkets, bakeries and restaurants). They add an inexpensive plastic seat that fits buckets. For longer term composting of human waste, please see the [Sewer Catastrophe Companion](#) prepared by our colleagues at [MDML](#) and endorsed by the city.

A large earthquake will put the burden for managing toilet needs on individual families. We strongly urge King County to adopt an approach that fosters household and neighborhood resilience for months or years that may be required for restoration of sewer service. To prepare families, we encourage you to adopt the [Twin Bucket Emergency Toilet](#). Awareness should come before disaster strikes and be affirmed in simple, clear, written instructions.

Warm Regards -

Organization Volunteers, Public Hygiene Lets Us Stay Human (PHLUSH)