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Key Insights

- Providing safe parking lots for individuals living in their vehicles is a relatively new but growing response to homelessness.
- Evidence from existing programs indicates that they address a real community need.
- Program models remain in flux as operators experiment with differing service modalities.
- While there have been instances of community resistance to safe parking lots and identifying appropriate lots can be a challenge, many lots open up quickly and maintain a positive relationship with their community.
- An important programmatic choice is whether parkers are only allowed to stay on the lot at night or can stay all day long. Longer hours are attractive to clients but create operational challenges.
- Case manager-led problem solving appears to be the most successful strategy for placing clients into permanent housing.
- Moving clients into housing remains a challenge. Rehousing rates are comparable to the rates achieved by street outreach programs. This comparison is inexact because street outreach programs most likely engage individuals with higher acuity. This population is harder to serve but is also more likely to qualify for subsidized housing programs.

The Safe Parking Concept

Safe Parking programs are a relatively new program concept designed to help people experiencing homelessness regain stable housing. They provide secure places for people sheltering in their vehicles to park and sleep overnight, provide basic sanitary services, and typically connect individuals to a range of social services. As such they combine elements of street outreach where they seek to engage and build a relationship with the unsheltered homeless and of emergency shelters where they provide individuals sanctuary from living on the streets.

The concept was pioneered by New Beginnings in Santa Barbara, California, which opened its first lot in 2004. Since then, the program has been adopted or tested by dozens of other communities.

Nevertheless, because the program is new and has not been sanctioned by federal funders, little is known about how the programs operate and their impacts.

This research sought to identify and interview existing programs to improve our understanding of how it works and how it integrates into the broader homeless crisis system. The research team identified programs with a multi-pronged strategy. They started with a list of programs that had

ordered a safe parking program manual distributed by Santa Barbara New Beginnings and then augmented the list with web searches, snowball sampling, and a list of communities identified by research teams at the University of California, San Diego and Rutgers University.¹ Programs that volunteered to participate filled out a web survey and were interviewed.



This search identified 43 communities with safe parking programs, and the team was able to interview and survey 19 of them.² As seen on the map these programs are primarily found on the west coast. This geographic bias may be a result of snowball sampling based on California communities. Nevertheless, web searches failed to find evidence of programs in other major cities. Safe parking, in addition, maybe primarily a west coast phenomenon because the mild climate makes sheltering in a vehicle year-round feasible, and these communities have particularly high rates of unsheltered homelessness.

Programs Meet an Identifiable Need

Research and the experience of surveyed programs indicate that safe parking addresses a genuine community need. Studies found that between 30% and 50% of unhoused individuals in West Coast cities now utilize their vehicles as a primary source of shelter (NLCHP, 2019). Moreover, the needs of individuals sheltering in their vehicles are different from other unsheltered homeless individuals (Wakin, 2005). They have access to greater resources as demonstrated by their ability to maintain a vehicle, and they typically exhibit lower levels of acuity compared to other unsheltered homeless individuals. At the same time, the vehicular homeless survive in a precarious position. Living in a vehicle is often criminalized, creating risks of accumulating fines and possible loss of their vehicle and their ability to work (Mitchell, 1997). Thus, safe parking provides a possible avenue that can prevent individuals from slipping into further hardship (Rosenthal & Foscarinis, 2006).

Most of the programs surveyed have experienced high demand for their safe parking slots. Over half of the programs have to place applicants on a waitlist either all or some of the time.

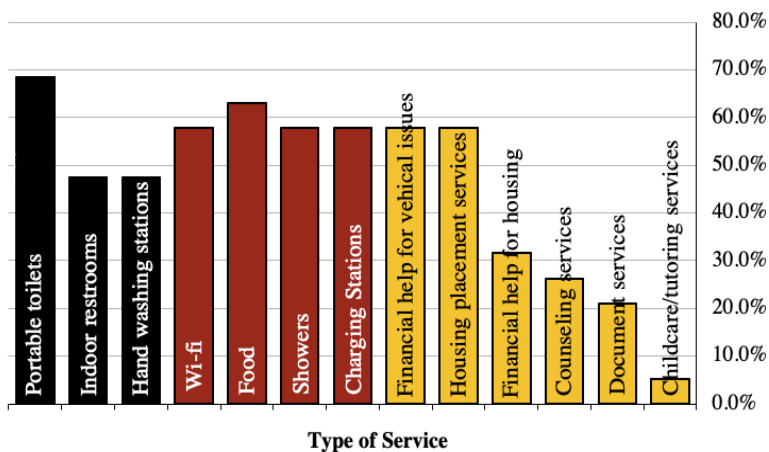
Program Models

HUD or other major funders have yet to recognize safe parking as a standard program. Consequently, existing programs have adopted diverse models. One group of programs, we call the umbrella model, is organized by a central actor and maintains multiple parking lots. These programs are more likely to be funded by governments with a combination of local, county, state,

or federal dollars. They tend to offer case management and be integrated into their community's network of programs servicing individuals experiencing homelessness. These programs operate up to 9 lots with an average of 5. The number of parking spaces provided ranges between 21 and 101, which an average of 57. They are supported by substantial budgets that range between \$100,000 to over \$200,000 per year.³

On the other end of the spectrum, there are several smaller, independent operators. They manage a single lot and offer spaces for between 6 up to 60 vehicles with an average of 19 spaces. They are less likely to offer case management and connect their clients to the network of homeless services. These programs often operate on much smaller budgets, with four programs reporting yearly budgets of less than \$10,000. In between these two models, there are examples of hybrids where several small programs pool resources to run safe parking services.

Services. All of the programs provided bathrooms to their clients either in a nearby building or with a portable toilet. Close to 60% of the programs provide services that improve the quality of life of their clients, including showers, meals, wi-fi, and charging stations for electronic devices. Funds for repairing vehicles and insurance and registration issues are available in over half of the programs as are housing placement services. Less frequently, programs provide funds for rental deposits, moving costs, and other expenses when renting an apartment. Some programs also provide counseling services, help with documents, and childcare.



Lot hours. A significant program design decision involves the hours lots are open to program clients. Lots often require parkers to vacate their parking slots early in the morning and only return in the evening, but slightly more than half of the providers interviewed by this research allow clients to remain in place 24 hours a day. The choice is difficult because many lots are needed for workers during the day. On the other hand, clients find the ability to stay in place and not have to rise early in the morning to be attractive features. One interviewee thought that keeping lots open 24 hours a day was the single most important feature for recruiting clients. Several providers were open all day even before the pandemic, but the numbers increased during the pandemic because remote work reduced daytime demand.

Recruitment. Most programs employ a multi-pronged approach to recruiting individuals experiencing homelessness into their programs. They include 2-1-1 call centers, word of mouth, online information, flyer distribution, and referrals from social services and law enforcement. Umbrella organizations were more likely to rely on waitlists when demand exceeded the number of slots available. In contrast, independent programs had more flexibility to increase enrollment limits in response to demand. Umbrella organization programs have more formal intake processes that often include an assessment such as the VI-SPDAT. They also sought to recruit individuals interested in seeking stable housing. In contrast, the smaller independent programs maintain less formal intake processes and express an interest in serving anyone who seeks a safer, more stable place to park whether they are seeking permanent housing or not.

Target Population. Most of the programs interviewed segregate their clients by demographic groups. Almost half gave preferences to certain groups -- such as families with children, the elderly, and veterans -- to target the service to the most vulnerable. Other programs with multiple lots designated certain lots to serve particular populations to improve the comfort of parkers. Certain programs limited service to current residents of their community. They cited community concerns of becoming a welfare magnet, although the evidence for the theory is limited (Rosenthal & Foscarinis, 2006). Faith-operated programs that retain more operational autonomy tended to emphasize low barriers to entry as part of their religious mission.

Safety and Security. During the intake process, programs typically check whether applicants are on a sex offender registry and have a valid driver's license and vehicle registration. Registered sex offenders are usually prohibited from enrolling, but many programs report working with applicants that do have current papers. Most programs conducted criminal background checks but did not always automatically disqualify participants with a record. At program registration, parkers are informed of lot rules that include a prohibition on alcohol and drug use, quiet hours, and rules of common courtesy.

Interviewees did not cite security and rule-breaking as major problems on their lots. Only 4 of the 19 programs contracted with paid security, though it was a major expense for the programs that did so. One program discontinued its security contract when problems did not arise to save on the expense. Another hired a current parker to conduct security, and the rest relied on a mix of self-governance, drop-ins by program staff, on-call staff, and video surveillance.

Challenges

Safe parking programs confront a range of challenges to continue operations and serve their clients well. They continue to explore program designs that help overcome resistance to services and lower barriers to service. The hours of lot operations is one important factor. Programs also report the need to be flexible with the on and off privileges, hours of arrival for people who work evenings and nights, and with the enforcement of rules. Most operators state that individuals who are exited from the program due to rule violations such as alcohol and drug-use restrictions are allowed to reapply, and they are only banned from the program after multiple infractions, use of weapons, or violence.

Programs require clients to have a valid driver's license, creating barriers for some populations. Individuals who have lost their licenses due to DUIs do not have access to Safe Parking programs. Undocumented individuals also face barriers to participating in Safe Parking and accessing housing programs.

Funding is a constant challenge because safe parking is not eligible to be funded through the HUD Continuum of Care program or Emergency Shelter Grants, though some programs have found avenues by which a portion of safe parking program operations can be supported through CoC or ESG monies. A few of the programs were forced to cease operations when funding ran out, and others report that limited funds prevent them from providing a richer set of services.

Community resistance is an issue, and opposition has forced providers to abandon some proposed lots. Nevertheless, given the strong opposition that frequently arises from the placement of homeless services, these programs report fewer problems from community members. Active community engagement, developing a good relationship with the local police

force, and strategic placement of lots are among the strategies employed to avoid opposition. Once in operation, community complaints have not been a major issue.

The final challenge cited by interviewees is their efforts to rehouse clients. There are limited slots available in voucher programs such as Housing Choice Vouchers, Rapid Re-Housing, and Permanent Supportive Housing. Moreover, because safe parking clients often do not exhibit high levels of acuity, they are less likely to be matched into these programs. In addition, most of the programs in this research operate in high-cost housing markets, making it difficult to identify other options for clients.

Program Outcomes

The degree to which safe parking is an effective addition to a community's homelessness response remains an open question. Most programs interviewed track parker exits to temporary or permanent, and they reported highly variable outcomes from a low of 13% of clients moving into temporary or permanent housing up to 98%. However, the program with a 98% success rate is an outlier because it operates primarily as a short-term measure as clients wait to receive motel room vouchers. After that program, the best reported success rate was 60%.

With the limited data available, it is not possible to find clear patterns associated with the differing outcomes. There are no discernable differences in outcomes based on umbrella vs. independent providers, the provision of case management, whether lots were open 24-hours a day, or in communities with camping prohibitions. Clearly, more data are needed to identify best practices in safe parking programs.

Benchmarks for safe parking program outcomes have not yet been established. The majority of the programs interviewed reviewed their outcome metrics but few stated specific targets that they sought to achieve. The most appropriate comparison case would be the housing outcomes from street outreach programs, though it is likely that the street outreach population includes more people who are chronically homeless and suffer high acuity. According to the 2019 System Performance Metrics published by HUD, the median percentage of clients who have a successful exit to either temporary or permanent housing was 45% for all urban Continuums of Care and was 38% among the largest metro areas. The programs that reported outcomes had a median success rate of 40%. More encouragingly, more than half of the programs achieved stronger outcomes than the street outreach in their community. More research is needed to investigate the barriers that inhibit these programs from achieving better results.

Beyond rehousing efforts, programs report that the other goals that they prioritize include improving parkers' feeling of safety and building a sense of community among program participants. From a community perspective, programs cited they have successfully improved perceptions of the homeless by the surrounding community.

Next Steps

This survey demonstrates that safe parking programs offer a flexible and promising alternative to helping people experiencing unsheltered homelessness in their vehicles, but the concept continues to evolve. The next steps need to provide more detailed information to help program providers refine and improve their operations. The steps include:

Further Evaluation. There remains much uncertainty on what practices work best, under what conditions, and for what types of clients. Continued data gathering and analysis are essential to providing insights on how to overcome resistance to program participation, how to design programs that meet the needs of the people experiencing homelessness in their vehicles, and how to improve methods for quickly resolving their issues with homelessness. Other unanswered questions are how to best integrate safe parking into a community's homeless services system and whether safe parking is a relatively cost-effective program.

Benchmarks. The homeless policy community should develop benchmarks to guide program operators. Benchmarks are needed for rehousing rates, lengths of stay, and services provided. Based on the programs in this survey, an initial benchmark for safe parking programs could be to place 30-40% of clients in temporary or permanent housing, though coastal communities with tight housing markets are likely to find this mark a challenge. In addition, programs that target services for families or vulnerable populations should consider recommendations promulgated by the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, including not turning away any families or members of such vulnerable groups and striving to swiftly place these clients into permanent housing.

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Endnotes:

¹ The Center for Homeless Inquiries would like to thank Nitan Shanas of Rutgers and Mirle Rabinowitz-Bussell and Leslie Lewis from UCSD for sharing their lists of safe parking programs identified by their programs.

² The researcher did not contact the programs in Santa Barbara or Los Angeles. These programs are discussed in the USC Homeless Policy Institute Briefer (HPRI 2018).

³ Additional details about the programs are available in the full report which can be downloaded at the Center for Homeless Inquiries website, www.homelessinquiries.org/reports.

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