



A SAFE PLACE TO SLEEP

A start-up guide to safe parking programs for
religious organizations



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2,314

That's how many people in King County
lived in their cars as of 2017.

People living in their cars worry about:



Crime

People sleeping in their cars are often victims of theft, car break-ins, and even violence.



Parking Violations

In Bellevue, cars can't be parked in public for more than 48 hrs. Paying for tickets or dealing with an impounded car can be crippling.



Basic Amenities

Bathrooms, showers, waste disposal, and places to store and prepare food are hard to find when living out of a car.

Safe Parking Programs can solve some of these problems and help people get back on track.

We dug into the structure and stories behind five successful safe parking programs...

...to share best practices and options that will help you help your unhoused neighbors.

What are safe parking programs?

Safe Parking Programs provide a safer place for people to sleep in their cars. There are four levels of service:

Basic: 1-2 spots, no services provided.

Low Impact: 3-6 spots, access to outdoor tap, portable toilets provided.

High Impact: 7+ spots, access to outdoor tap, portable toilets provided, connect guests to social service providers .

Maximum Impact: 7+ spots, access to outdoor tap, portable toilets provided, connect campers to social service providers, create “camp leadership” of 2-3 vehicle owners to maintain peer safety, compliance with rules and oversight of authorized camping.

How are they safer for the people using them?

Safety in numbers: Guests report feeling safer sleeping near other car campers.

Trusted community: All guests are screened and background checked.

Help is always available: 24 hour point of contact available to guests and many programs work closely with law enforcement to keep guests safe.

Who uses safe parking programs?

People often use safe parking programs while they're on waiting lists for shelters or housing assistance. Most of the guests have jobs. Many have children and pets with them.

“Safe parking lots often get used the first night you’re homeless. We tend to be the landing spot for folks who have absolutely no idea how to deal with homelessness.”

- Karina O’Malley, Lake Washington
United Methodist Church

“I had an older man in his late 60’s come, he was homeless for the first time. He was scared to death.”

- Sister Betty Schumacher, Saint
Jude’s Catholic Church

“One woman came to us pregnant. She went to the hospital, had the baby and came back and lived in her car with her newborn.”

- Karina O’Malley, Lake Washington
United Methodist Church

"I have a family of five who've been here for two weeks. They lived up north, both parents were working, mom was even working on her master's. Their building got sold and the new owner raised the rent so high they become homeless. The mom was a federal government worker and didn't get paid during the shut down. So they came to us."

- Sarah Davidson, Kent United Methodist Church

Do these programs enable chronic homelessness?

No, they create a path away from it. Safe Parking programs have been identified by case management agencies as a crucial service. They provide much needed safety, peace, and dignity to people working towards stable housing, many of whom are homeless for the first time. They're not a permanent solution, but a stepping stone on the path to stability.



Are we legally allowed to do this?

Yes, you are! According to the federal [Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act](#) congregations are free to use their properties in this way to pursue their religious missions, so long as they don't pose a public health or safety risk.



Getting people on board

First, get buy-in from your congregation

Form a committee: Determine the best program structure for your organization.

Obtain support: Present the proposal to church leadership and other organizations within the congregation (youth program leaders, etc.) and obtain written approval.

Then, consult local law enforcement

Early engagement and consultation with local law enforcement helps to ensure the success and safety of the program for two reasons:

Consensus & collaboration: Sharing your program structure with law enforcement officials and inviting them to be advocates and resources for the guests creates a collaborative relationship that benefits everyone.

Insights & Advice: Law enforcement officials will be able to provide expert advice on measures to keep the guests and surrounding community safe.

Two models of law enforcement engagement

Patrolling: Law enforcement has permission to come onto the property, patrol the lot, and evict trespassers. *Many guests feel safer knowing that the patrols come around.* However, norms should be discussed with law enforcement to ensure that the patrols serve the purpose of protecting guests, not policing them (discourage obtrusive practices like shining lights into vehicles, etc.).

Non-patrolling: Law enforcement does not have permission to patrol property. This mode is usually used by programs who've had issues with law enforcement as an obtrusive presence.

Last, engage with the immediate community

Neighbors of safe parking programs are often curious and interested in helping. Many also have safety concerns and would like to be involved in the planning process. Here are the most common community concerns and easy ways to address them:

Fear of drugs and crime: Background checks, support from law enforcement, signing a thorough code of conduct, institution of camp leadership.

Noise: Quiet hours.

Headlights shining into yard: Lights-out hours.

Litter and cleanliness: Good waste-disposal system.

How to perform community outreach

Define immediate community: Most programs only consider homes within a two block radius. Others limit their outreach to houses sharing a property line. It is not advised to engage in highly publicized outreach beyond these small segments (too many cooks in the kitchen).

Host a small town hall: At the beginning of a program, invite the community to provide input on the code of conduct, security measures, and program structure.

Letter to neighbors: Instead of hosting a town hall, another option is to send or hand-deliver a letter explaining (*not asking permission for*) your program to the immediate community. Provide contact information so they can relay their concerns or ask for more information. See an example [here](#).

Addressing community concerns is a trust-building exercise

Meet any demands that are physically possible, regardless of whether or not they're necessary. It's a trust-building exercise that will reduce tensions and increase buy-in.

"It's never about the specifics, people will find something to complain about. The piece of success I'd replicate is to give neighbors a point of contact. If they have a complaint, they need to feel heard."

- Karina O'Malley, Lake Washington
United Methodist Church

Program structure options

Choosing the right population for your program

Different programs serve different populations for the safety and security of the guests. When choosing the population for your program, consider what populations are served by surrounding organizations.

Women and families with children: These programs serve single women or families. Families are defined as groups containing at least one adult and at least one child.

Men and couples: These programs provide a safe place to sleep for single men and couples without children. Many services preferentially serve families and women, which leaves men and childless couples with fewer options.

Duration of stay

Most programs have a 90 day limit, but many are far more flexible. The guideline of 90 days seems to be helpful, with exceptions made on a case-by-case basis.

“Other folks are using the church parking lot as their home and have been here for years. They have very little hope of ever living anywhere else. They know everyone, they have their routines. They help clean up the church and they volunteer, they come to the coffee hour, some people know them and don’t realize they’re from the parking lot. That’s delightful in one way, but also a sad statement on society.”

Karina O’Malley, Lake Washington United Methodist Church

Hours

Night-Only: Many programs start small by only allowing a few cars and acting as a night-only program, simply providing a safe place to sleep. By starting small, this lets organizations grow their safe parking programs gradually as they learn the ins and outs.

24 Hours: When possible, 24-hour structures provide many benefits to the guests. “Moving the car in and out is hard when you’re low on gas or you break down. Some people have no other place to go,” one program leader told us. The constant shifting and moving can create a sense of instability. By allowing overlap between guests and congregation, 24-hour programs are able to create a sense of community.

Security Measures

The safety of the guests, congregants, and the surrounding community should be the top priority. Here are some common measures you can take to keep everyone safe.

*“We have 30 security guards full time in the parking lot: **the guests.** Anything that happens, I know about immediately. They all have my phone number. Build a community where people come to you if they need something.”*

– Karina O’malley, Lake Washington
United Methodist Church

Security measures

24 hour contact person: It's important the guests, neighbors, and other stakeholders have access to a 24-hour contact person who can help address issues as they arise. Having a responsive, empathic point of contact can help alleviate tensions and make all parties feel safe and heard.

Background checks: Several organizations include background checks as part of the entry requirements. Applicants with backgrounds of violent crime, sexual abuse, child abuse, or domestic abuse should not be admitted. Petty crimes and drug charges more than 2-3 years old are fine.

Authorized parking pass: Most programs have safe parking passes that identify vehicles as part of the program. These are helpful for hosts and law enforcement to keep track of who has been screened.

Security measures *(cont.)*

Cameras: Several organizations have installed security cameras at parking lot entrances.

No need for overnight guards: Hired or volunteer overnight security is cost prohibitive and not at all necessary. None of the programs we consulted used overnight security.

“We don’t really have problems with that. I’m very strict about the rules. I don’t put up with anything. That said, I’ve had 400 people come through this program and only had to ask five to leave.”

– Sarah Davidson, Kent United Methodist Church

Personal vehicles only, no RVs or campers

RVs and campers can create the following complications:

Transitional vs. chronic homelessness: Large vehicles are easier to live in long-term. Anecdotally speaking, the population of folks living in these vehicles are often chronically homeless and less inclined to work towards a more stable housing situation.

Problems with drugs and crime: Many organizations we spoke with told us that campers and RVs had a higher incidences of issues with drugs and crime.

Abandonment expenses: If a large vehicle in poor condition is abandoned in a church lot, having the vehicle removed and disposed of can be costly and cumbersome.

Bathrooms & showers

One of the crucial amenities provided by safe parking programs is access to bathroom facilities. All programs provide **portable toilets**, some provide **portable showers**, and others allow **partial building access** to guests when the building is staffed.

One portable toilet for every seven cars: This ratio seems to work for most programs. Facilities will require service, which can cost as little as \$125-150 a month per toilet.

Access to indoor bathrooms, sinks and showers: “You just can’t feel clean using a portable toilet,” said a program leader. Access to indoor facilities grants people the dignity and comfort of being clean, which is hard to achieve when living out of your car. Many programs allow access for an hour or two in the mornings and evenings. *Don’t have a shower?* Contact the [Bellevue Aquatic Center](#) about shower scholarships for your guests.

Intake process: Making human connections

Beyond logistics: this is the first opportunity to connect and make a difference in the life of an unhoused neighbor.

“The host’s first responsibility is to tell the new arrival this is a safe, welcoming place where they can be accepted and build some relationships. Many are ashamed and mistrustful.”

– Char Downes, Lake Washington
United Methodist Church

“We thought it was really important that they knew someone cared about them.”

Sister Betty Schumacher, Saint
Jude’s Catholic Church

Intake process: The logistics

Connecting people to resources: Learn about each individual's situation and connect them to the service providers that can help create an action plan towards stable housing.

Consent forms for background checks: While guests fill out these forms, explain that the background checks are to ensure that the safe parking community is a safe place for *them*. Also a good time to ask if they know of anything that will come up on their background checks that they'd like to talk about.

Orientation and code of conduct: Tour of facilities, discuss and sign the code.

Authorized Guest Pass: This pass should be displayed in the windshield identifying the car as part of the program. [See example here.](#)

Code of Conduct

The code of conduct is the cornerstone of a successful safe parking program. It ensures an organized, effective program and creates a sense of accountability to adhere to the rules.

We've created a detailed code of conduct that aggregates lessons learned from other successful programs. [You can find the code here.](#)

Monthly meetings

Many safe parking programs host a mandatory monthly meeting that coincides with a community dinner. These meetings serve several purposes:

Assessing progress: Service providers, case workers, or safe parking organizers can check in on action plan progress and connect guests to helpful resources.

Addressing community concerns: Meetings provide an opportunity to make announcements, address issues, and introduce new guests to the community.

Engagement with congregation/neighbors: Often, congregants or neighbors will volunteer to cook meals or help organize monthly meetings. This is a great opportunity for them to meet, befriend, and learn about guests.

Partnerships with social services

Social service organizations work with guests to create action plans and connect them to resources tailored to their needs, like day centers, transportation assistance, job support, and more. **Below are links and contacts for organizations who can help with social services for guests:**

[Congregations for the Homeless](#)

(425) 289-4044

Josh Terlouw
josht@cfhomeless.org

[Sofia Way](#)

(425) 463-6285

Cynthia Brown
Cynthia@sofiaway.org

[Hope Link](#)

(425) 869-6000

hopelink@hopelink.org

[Catholic Community Services](#)

(425) 679-0350

info@ccsww.org

[IKRON](#)

(425) 242-1713

ikrongreaterseattle@ikron.org

Not sure where to start?
Bellevue Human Services
can help.

Bellevue Human Services can help you
find the right social service
organizations and amenities that
would be helpful for guests.

Call Teri Ekstrom for
guidance:

(425) 452 6884

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