

SMART PRACTICES FOR SAFE PARKING

April 2021
University of Southern California
Sol Price School of Public Policy

The Safe Parking Concept

Nearly three dozen communities struggling to assist their unsheltered and sheltered homeless populations have developed safe parking programs. These programs recognize that offering secure places for people sheltering in their vehicles to park and sleep overnight meet basic safety and physiological needs by using a range of social services. Adults require their basic needs to be met to focus on finding work, housing, and community (Kenrick et al., 2010).

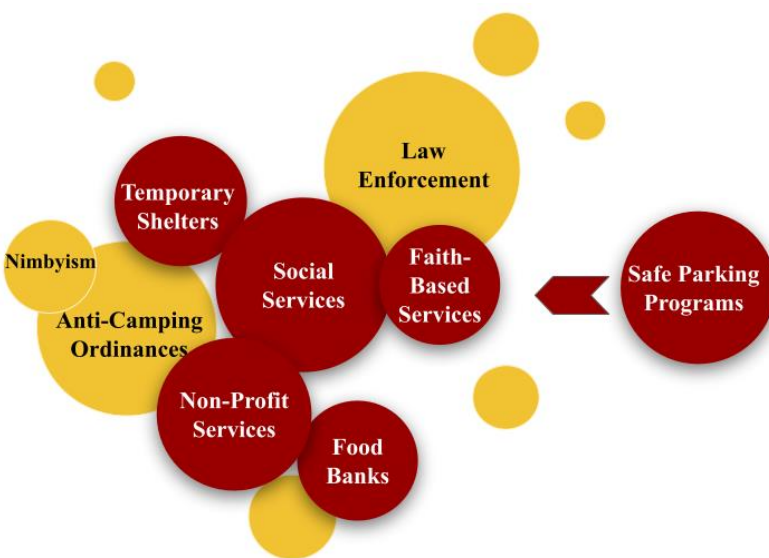
Our research identified 43 programs outside of Los Angeles; programs identified are operated by nonprofit organizations, faith-based organizations, cities, and counties and are found primarily on the West Coast.

The newness of safe parking programs presented a challenge in the evaluation of program success. Thus, our research questions focused on program recruitment, target service population, service provision, and program benchmarks. We studied the characteristics of safe parking programs to differentiate successful program approaches and determine which specific and unique strategies may translate effectively to other communities.

The following brief summarizes a report on safe parking programs from surveys and interviews with 19 programs responsive to the team's outreach.

Unhoused and Underserved

Research from the NLCHP (2019) indicates that between 30% and 50% of unhoused individuals in West Coast cities now utilize their vehicles as a primary source of shelter. The needs of individuals sheltering in their vehicles are different from chronically homeless individuals living outdoors (Wakin, 2005).



The figure depicts overlapping homeless service network players and safe parking programs based on the research conducted by our team.

By maintaining access to minimal shelter, individuals sheltering in their vehicles may maintain work and community ties not afforded to individuals living on the street. In communities where living in vehicles is criminalized, a temporary episode of housing instability can lead to the loss of a vehicle, livelihood, and ability to regain stability (Mitchell, 1997). Safe parking can prevent individuals from slipping into further hardship (Rosenthal & Foscarinis, 2006).

Safe parking programs enter a complex arena of homeless services, combining elements of street outreach and emergency shelters. These programs do not fit neatly into existing service models.

Prepared by:
Lindsay McElwain
Daniel Schiele
Laila Waheed

Safe Parking At a Glance

43 safe parking programs nationwide

Primarily located on the West Coast

Program sizes range from 5 to 101 spaces

Programs focus on providing stability

Connections to social services support rehousing

Answering Our Research Questions

Our research found three program models: umbrella organizations, composite programs and independent operators. For details on each model, see page 3.

Recruitment and Intake

Recruitment included 2-1-1, word of mouth, online information, and referrals from social services and law enforcement. Umbrella organizations utilized waitlists for services; composite and independent programs had flexible limits. Some umbrella organization programs conducted formal intake interviews like VI-SPDAT. Screening processes in composite and independent programs were more informal. Composite and umbrella programs accepted parkers interested in stable housing. Most programs conducted background checks but did not always automatically disqualify participants with a record. Most programs required participants to agree to a code of conduct.

Target Population and Eligibility

Programs prioritize specific demographic groups, residents of a city or county, sort parkers, or exclude specific demographics. Priority service to demographic populations can support program goals to serve the most vulnerable participants. Programs engaging in demographic sorting reported parker comfort as a goal, and often maintain smaller lots. Programs operating with residency exclusions cited community concerns of becoming a welfare magnet despite limited evidence for the theory (Rosenthal & Foscarinis, 2006). Faith-operated programs have the autonomy to operate safe parking with low barriers to entry as part of religious missions.

Services

Varying levels of service inputs result in outputs, outcomes, and impacts found in the logic model (See page 3). Basic services improve physical and mental health, while intermediate and full services work towards enhanced trust and engagement in local communities.



Benchmarks

Benchmarking is an important mechanism used to help safe parking programs direct focus and conduct self-evaluation to track progress towards achieving goals (Bryson, 2011). Without benchmarking and specific measures for success, programs may have difficulty determining what resources and inputs to contribute to achieving better services for parkers and more resources for the program (See Logic Model, page 3).

Most programs track parker exits to permanent and temporary housing and have a median rehousing rate of 40 percent. Programs averaged a 34% success rate in transitioning participants to permanent or temporary housing in 2020 (with one 98% outlier excluded) despite differences in housing affordability. Programs reported focusing on parkers' sense of safety and community as an important program outcome. In addition to parker benefits, programs cited success of the program as the improvement in homelessness perceptions from the surrounding community.

Methodology

Twenty programs responded to the team's interview request; one short pilot was excluded from the team's findings. To understand the context of safe parking, the team conducted a literature review of general homeless services and the features that overlap with safe parking.

Primary Research and Data Collection Process:

1. identifying safe parking programs,
2. contacting program leaders to participate in a questionnaire; and,
3. conducting a semi-structured interview with program leaders.

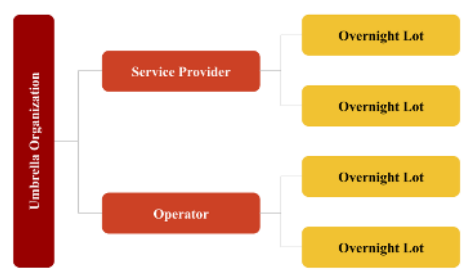
Develop Case Study Narratives:

The data collected from surveys and interviews provided the team with information on 19 safe parking programs. To analyze the results, the team applied the program logic model features and sought out patterns in practices and contexts for successful programs.

Limitations to the methodology:

1. Low response rate concern; 20 of 32 contacted programs resulted in a representative sample.
2. Self-reported information can be unreliable; respondents were credible and shared challenge points.
3. Data collection inconsistencies between programs; one to one comparison with data was not possible across all programs.

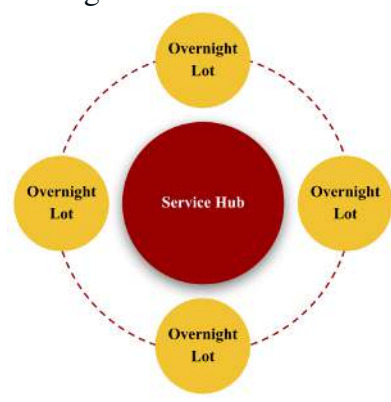
Umbrella Organization Model



Safe parking programs under the umbrella organization model are composed of a larger parent organization that acts as the “umbrella” for the program’s service providers, operators, and associated parking lots. Sometimes, umbrella organizations contract with a third-party administrator; other umbrella organization safe parking programs operate all aspects of the program. When umbrella organizations contract for program administration, the umbrella organization remains the primary service provider and oversight agency. Often located in larger communities, umbrella organization programs are the largest in scope and size and make up 40% of all programs surveyed.

Composite Model

Composite model safe parking programs have a hybrid of elements from umbrella organizations and independent operators, featuring multiple safe parking locations with a central or shared service location. The lots are equipped with basic services, such as restrooms and handwashing stations, and parkers utilize additional services at another, closely integrated location. The model differs from the umbrella model because the lots are not the core of the program. Composite programs often highlighted the importance of building community among parkers like the independent operator models. Parkers might be placed at a location with demographically similar groups or moved to a different lot if a better social fit is needed. Umbrella and independent programs can learn from composite model programs to facilitate growth.



Independent Operator Model



Independent operator model safe parking programs are self-initiated by organizations in response to the organizational mission or community needs. Programs in this model are administered and funded by small faith-based and nonprofit organizations. Independent operators host safe parking on property owned by or leased by the organization. These programs are typically smaller in scale than the umbrella organization and composite programs, with the largest offering no more than 25 parking spaces. Typically, faith or nonprofit organization staff run the program, although many programs cited volunteer support including providing hot meals and donating clothing or sanitation supplies. Only two independent operator programs receive government funds; most are unconstrained by regulations and data reporting requirements.

Safe Parking Logic Model

The logic model explains connections in the safe parking process and shows smart practices programs use to move from inputs to results. For example, funding sources and stability can impact program longevity and service level. Rules and eligibility requirements are impacted by community input but may limit utilization and program impact on individuals. Individual program approach implicated varying success and challenge points.



Recommendations

Our team developed six recommendation areas for safe parking to improve utilization and participant success. Communities starting safe parking can also learn from the recommendations.

Intentional Design

Programs should plan, operate, and structure their organizations intentionally to meet local needs and align with local resources. If the focus is placing parkers into stable housing, everything a program does, from the intake process to social service contracting, should meet that goal. If stability is the core goal, community building should come first. Additionally, programs should design their operation with the ability to grow while being aware of local resources.

Strategic Locations

Safe parking programs should organize and position lots and services according to geography, population needs, and local social services. Programs seeking to serve families should strategically locate lots near schools and parks. Programs not serving families should consider avoiding locations near schools or dense neighborhoods. Programs seeking to serve RVs should focus on lots in industrial areas due to size and visibility.

Fostering Trust

Safe parking programs should focus on fostering trust with and among parkers. Trust can help build community and dignity for parkers, increasing their ability to engage with social services. Smaller lots can facilitate more connections among parkers, making parkers feel like they belong. Flexible eligibility requirements help build trust and lower barriers. Sharing successes amongst parkers builds hope and encourages parkers to take next steps.

Focused Social Services

Case management services are essential for rehousing, but programs do not need to fund case management independently; programs can integrate with third-party social services. Focused social services work by targeting each demographics' specific needs but can succeed on-site or at a nearby service hub. Programs can benefit from Continuum of Care connections. Safe parking programs should participate in Homeless Management Information System data entry.

Engaging Stakeholders

Programs should build relationships with law enforcement, other safe parking programs, and all applicable public, private, and nonprofit organizations. To prevent initial opposition, programs should practice early engagement with stakeholders and share other communities' successes. Stakeholder participation on task forces, notification letters, and listening sessions are all examples for successful stakeholder communication.

Implementing Benchmarks

Programs should develop benchmarks for rehousing rates, lengths of stay, and service engagement with internal and external stakeholders. Based on surveyed program averages and local housing context, safe parking programs should aim for 30-40% rehousing within 30 days. Programs should strive to meet the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness standards for families and other vulnerable groups, including not turning away any families needing safe parking and swift placement into permanent housing.

Future Research

Exploring the connection between target social services and rehousing successes

Social service provisions and rehousing success rate data gathered by our team were sporadic; we were unable to find any significant connection between service provision and rehousing.

Developing standard benchmarks

Future researchers can further develop findings on program successes to strengthen benchmark recommendations and measurable outcomes.

Sources:

- Bryson, J.M. (2011). *Strategic planning for public and nonprofit organizations: A guide to strengthening and sustaining organizational achievement* (4th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Kenrick, D. T., Griskevicius, V., Neuberg, S. L., & Schaller, M. (2010). Renovating the pyramid of needs: Contemporary extensions built upon ancient foundations. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 5(3), 292–314. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41613338>
- Mitchell, D. (1997). The annihilation of space by law: The roots and implications of anti-homeless laws in the United States. *Antipode*, 29(3), 303-335.
- National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty [NLCHP]. (2019). *Housing not handcuffs: Ending the criminalization of homelessness in US cities*. National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty. <https://nlchp.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/HOUSING-NOT-HANDCUFFS-2019-FINAL.pdf>
- Rosenthal, R., & Foscarinis, M. (2006). Responses to homelessness: Past policies, future directions, and a right to housing. In Bratt R., Stone M., & Hartman C. (Eds.), *A Right to Housing: Foundation for a New Social Agenda* (pp. 316-339). Temple University Press.
- Wakin, M. (2005). Not sheltered, not homeless: RVs as Makeshifts. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 48(8), 1013–10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764204274197>