

# Safe Parking Best Practices

## First, get buy-in from your congregation

- Form a committee: Determine the best program structure for your community.
- Obtain support: Present the proposal to church leadership and other organizations within the congregation (youth program leaders, etc.) and obtain written approval.

## Second, 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.

## Third, 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.
- Addressing community concerns is a trust-building exercise

## 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 (e.g. 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.

Lesson Learned: Try to 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.

## 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.

## Safe Parking Best Practices

- 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. Be prepared for folks needing a significantly longer period as some literally have no other place to go.

### 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.

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

- 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.
- 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.

### 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. These facilities will require service and will need to be budgeted for.
- Access to indoor bathrooms, sinks and showers: 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 your local YMCA or health club regarding day passes for guests this will also need to be budgeted for.

# Safe Parking Best Practices

## Partnerships with social services

Human service organizations work with guests to create action plans and connect them to resources tailored to their needs, such as day centers, transportation assistance, job support, and more. Coordinating with your local providers is important as they need to determine how to best serve your guests.

## Governance and Guest Behavior

### Personal vehicles only, no RVs or campers

RVs and campers can create the following complications: 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. Many organizations we spoke with told us that campers and RVs had a higher incidence of issues with drugs and crime. 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.

**Intake process:** 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. 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. Example can be found in the Safe Parking folder at <https://ecww.org/diocesan-ministries/Homeless>
- **Authorized Guest Pass:** This pass should be displayed in the windshield identifying the car as part of the program. Example can be found in the Safe Parking folder at <https://ecww.org/diocesan-ministries/Homeless>

## 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.