



## Dane County Department of Human Services

### Division of Housing Access & Affordability

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210 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., Room 421, Madison, WI 53703

DATE: 9/20/2023

TO: Health and Human Needs Committee Members

FROM: Melissa Mennig, Project Housing Program Specialist

SUBJECT: Car Camping and Safe Parking Program Report

### **BACKGROUND**

In November of 2021, a resolution was approved by the Dane County Board directing County staff to report on potential car camping options for people experiencing homelessness based on 2012 report recommendations from Madison-area Urban Ministry (now known as Just Dane) regarding responses and strategies to address needs and gaps in homeless services.

An interim report and recommendations were delivered to the Health and Human Needs Committee in 2021 by Housing Access and Affordability staff. The initial report, explored the following topics:

- National safe parking program models
- State of Wisconsin campground license requirements
- Other program models similar to safe parking that were better suited to the weather elements in Wisconsin. (i.e. Dairy Drive Campground).
- Survey of suitability of County properties

Based on the research completed as well as work done with representatives from the entities below, it was determined that there were no Dane County-owned properties suitable for safe parking located in the City of Madison.

- Dane County Human Services
- Dane County Land and Water Resources
- Dane County Planning and Development
- Tamara D. Grigsby Office of Equity and Inclusion
- Dane County Corporation Counsel
- Dane County Risk Management
- Alliant Energy Center

- Public Health Madison Dane County

## **OVERVIEW**

To complete the follow-up report, staff in the Housing Access and Affordability (HAA) division recommended engaging people with lived experience of car camping to gain perspective as to why people are sheltering in their vehicles rather than in local shelters and explore what type of program(s) would best fit the needs for this population.

From this recommendation, three goals were identified:

- 1) Learn more about the scope of the issue in Dane County including how many households are car camping, what are the demographics of those households and the primary reason households are car camping.
- 2) Identify the safe parking program needs of our local population.
- 3) Identify safe parking program cost estimates for different staffing models.

## **SUMMARY**

In order to inform the above goals, various engagement strategies were utilized to get a broad understanding of the issue locally from those with lived experience of car camping as well as gain the perspective of providers for this population.

Strategies of engagement included one-on-one in-person engagement at known car camping locations, focus groups with providers, data collection from case conferencing spreadsheets, utilization of the Point-in-Time Count survey, phone and Zoom interviews and attending conferences to glean national best practices. The following groups were engaged in these efforts:

- People with lived expertise of car camping
- Street Outreach providers
- Bethel Lutheran Church staff
- TEP staff
- Dairy Drive Campground staff
- Staff from the City of Madison- Community Development Division
- Point-in-Time Committee
- The Salvation Army Diversion staff
- Wise Women Gathering Place staff (Green Bay, WI)
- National Alliance to End Homelessness Unsheltered Conference
- National Vehicle Residency Collective Summit

## **SCOPE**

To determine the scope of the need for a safe parking program in Dane County several sources were used to estimate an appropriate sized pilot safe parking option, because it is difficult to quantify how many household are experiencing car camping at a given time.

According to the annual Point in Time Count, a one night snapshot of all households in our community experiencing homelessness on the 4th Wednesday in January, 21

individuals experienced car camping during the 2022 count and 16 individuals experienced car camping during the 2023 count.

Feedback regarding car camping varied widely amongst street outreach providers. Catalyst for Change reported they saw approximately 10 individuals and 5 families car camping at a given time, while the staff at the Tiny House Village reported 30 car campers when they were taking applications for their program. Additionally, the Transition Education Program reported getting calls from 3 families a week who were car camping and Bethel Homeless Ministry reported having 4-5 people interested in safe parking during a 3 month period. On the outreach case conferencing spreadsheet 15 out of 70 households reported sleeping in their vehicle at least some of the time.

Housing Access and Affordability staff identified 57 vehicles car camping in two of the most populated car camping locations over a 4 month period, which averaged 14-15 vehicles per each separate outreach engagement.

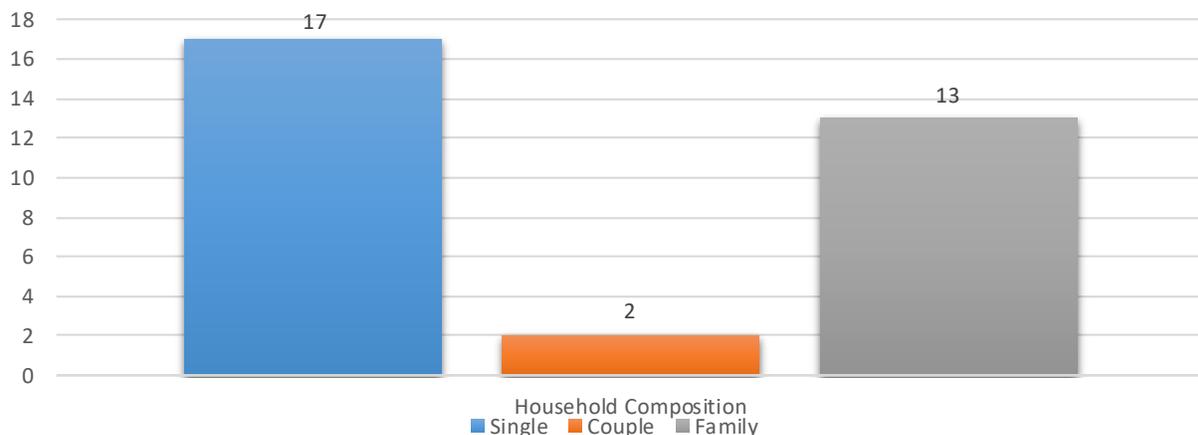
Based on the data points analyzed, a safe parking program in Dane County could average 15-30 parking stalls.

### **PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK**

Through individual one-on-one interviews with people experiencing car camping, responses to the Point in Time Count survey and phone interviews with diversion staff, 32 households were interviewed to get their feedback on why they were experiencing car camping and what would be need from a safe parking program.

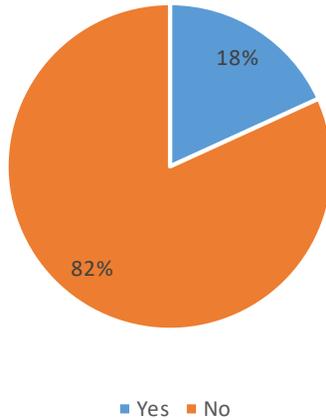
### **FIGURE 1: HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITON (n=32)**

Figure 1 illustrates the household composition of those who completed the car camping interview questions. A total of 17 households (53%) reported being single, 2 households (6%) reported being part of a couple and 13 households (41%) reported being part of a family.



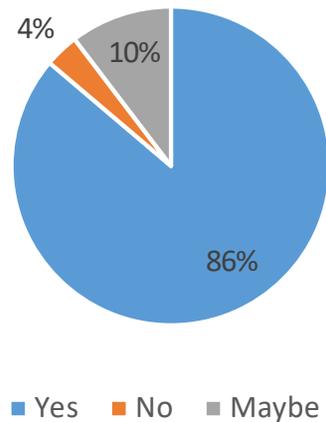
**FIGURE 2: PET (n=22)**

Figure 2 illustrates households who reported having a pet. A total of 4 (18%) households reported they had a pet, and 18 households (82%) reported they did not have a pet.



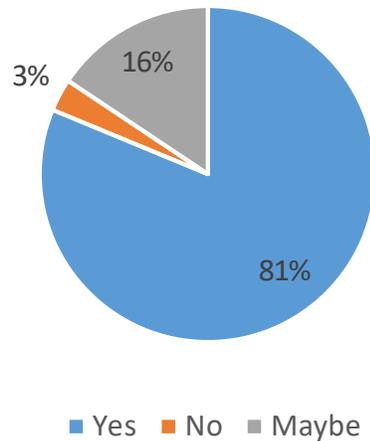
**FIGURE 3: UTILIZATION OF A SAFE PARKING PROGRAM (n=29)**

Figure 3 illustrates households indicating whether or not they would utilize a designated legal parking area for people who are unhoused. A total of 25 participants (86%) reported that they would utilize a safe parking option, 1 participant (4%) reported they would not utilize a safe parking option and 3 participants (10%) might utilize a safe parking option. Of note, 100% of families reported they would utilize a safe parking option.



#### FIGURE 4: HOUSING VS. CAR CAMPING (n=32)

Figure 4 illustrates participants who reported preferring a safe housing option to a safe parking option. A total of 26 participants (86%) reported they preferred a safe housing option to car camping, while 1 participant (4%) reported not preferring safe housing to car camping, and 5 participants (10%) reported that they might prefer housing to car camping.



Interviewed households also were asked to identify the top reasons they were currently car camping. From this question 5 different themes emerged:

- **Dissatisfaction with shelter experience. Households felt:**
  - Shelter was too crowded and wanted more privacy
  - Too many rules existed in shelter
  - Pets not allowed in shelter was a barrier
  - They had an unsafe experience in a shelter
- **Lack of income. Households reported:**
  - On a fixed income and can't afford housing
  - Cost of living in an apartment is too high
- **Barriers to housing. Households reported:**
  - On the sex offender registry
  - Evictions, no one will rent to them
- **Other life circumstances. Households disclosed:**
  - Fleeing domestic violence
  - AODA or mental health reason
- **Lifestyle Choice**
  - Traveling camper lifestyle

A key note in the findings, was that 100% families identified that the reason they were car camping instead of utilizing shelter was because there are no available shelter beds and they are on a waitlist for shelter. Madison's only shelter for families experiencing

homelessness has a capacity of 35 families. The Domestic Abuse Intervention Services (DAIS) shelter is running at reduced capacity due to funding.

## **SITE FEATURES**

Individuals surveyed expressed several common features that should be considered if a safe parking program is developed. The most frequent responses regarding needs included access to showers, restrooms, drinkable water, access to Wi-Fi, electricity for charging electronics, and security cameras.

Participants also described wanting a location that would be similar to a campground with grass and trees for shade, at least one parking space between vehicles for privacy and a site that was not located in the middle of downtown, but was little further out, although close to a gas station. As one participant stated, "Would want to have at least a one parking spot sized area between each car for some semblance of privacy. Restrooms (with showers if possible) onsite would also be good. An area that's not just a parking lot but has trees and other greenery makes a huge difference. It improves mental health, and being parked in the shade in the summer time makes it much more tolerable. Since gas money is usually an issue being within walking distance of a store is nice too."

Additionally, they identified the need for support services to transition from their vehicles into housing, as well as additional funds for necessities like car repairs or security deposits. Many also brought up that different sites might be needed for singles and families.

Opinions tended to vary greatly on the below features and whether these features made people feel comfortable or likely to use a site for safe parking. There was a wide range of opinions as to how big a site should be. Some thought a safe parking program should include a large lot (20-50 parking spots) while others wanted a much smaller lot (2-5 parking spots). Other dissenting opinions arose around allowing pets, if there should be fencing or a gate in and out of the site and whether or not they would utilize a safe parking model at a faith congregation.

Some people interviewed questioned whether it would truly be safe and if efforts should be spent on housing rather than safe parking. As one individual stated. "I am concerned that there will be a lot of drug use or violent behavior in a group spot, and I might not use it depending on who else is using it." and another individual argued, "What is safe? Is it only for the night? Would rather money was spent on land for homes."

## **PROVIDER FEEDBACK**

In addition to gathering feedback from people with lived experience of car camping, staff also conducted group interviews with support service providers regarding the need for a safe parking program in Dane County.

Throughout the interview process, several potential positive outcomes were identified including, street outreach providers thought this type of programming would make it

easier to locate people who are car camping, because it would reduce the number of locations people were utilizing to park and it would reduce the time spent trying to locate individuals. Providers also felt that by having a program it would be easier to coordinate street outreach efforts between teams and provide better coordinated service delivery for survival gear and resources.

While there were several positive outcomes identified in the creation of a safe parking program providers also highlighted several concerns they had regarding this type of a program. The top concerns from providers fell into three categories:

1. Process
  - Need for parking may outweigh the capacity
  - Length of stay
  - Eligibility and intake process
2. Individualized Programs
  - Need separate programs for singles and families
3. Cost
  - It's very expensive if people abandon their vehicles and to repair vehicles. They recommended not allowing RVs.
  - Hard to locate ongoing funding for this type of program
  - It is an expensive program; would rather spend those funds on permanent housing solutions or shelter for families

## **FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Budgets nationally for safe parking programs vary widely based on the size of the program, cost of the land being utilized for the site, the program staffing structure, hours of operations, use of volunteers and legal requirements of individual states.

Several budget examples nationally include a safe parking program in the city of Santa Rosa, CA where the cost estimates for a 50 vehicle program that operates 24/7 is \$1,113,250 without wrap-around services and \$1,299,826 with wrap-around services. Similarly, a safe parking program in Seattle, WA for 25 cars and RVs with wrap-around services is estimated to cost \$1.5 million.

Less expensive models nationally tend to have many more in-kind donations, heavily utilize volunteers, are overnight only and have less requirements for amenities. One example is a program in Oakland, CA called ICAC, which operates a 25 vehicle parking program from 7:00pm-7:00am for \$250,000. Their program model does not have wrap-around services, utilizes church parking lots, and employs guests as lot monitors and partners with other non-profits to provide most other services including laundry and showers.

In Wisconsin, there is a program operated by the Wise Women Gathering Place in Green Bay, WI. This program has a budget of \$195,000 for 26 vehicles and operates from 6 pm-9am. Cost considerations differ significantly for this program, because the Oneida Nation provides the land, garbage and snow removal, while churches provide meals, basic survival gear and gas cards. There are no showers, cameras or security

companies provided. Staffing consists of one supervisor, three safety monitors and an intake staff. Additionally, the program is not legally required to follow the State of Wisconsin's laws for campground licensing.

Before a program can operate locally in Dane County, legal requirements including the State of Wisconsin's laws for campground licensing which supersedes other local ordinances for overnight parking or camping. State law directs that a campground license is required when:

- A person offers or intends to offer 3 or fewer campsites and advertises to the public an offer to camp OR four or more campsites exist regardless of advertising or outreach to the public.

The law also sets limits for:

- Length of time is allowed (8 continuous months in a 12 month period).
- Distance between sites (10 feet).
- How many people per site (6 people or one family unit).
- Site amenities: Safe drinking water, hand washing stations, toilet building (or approved alternative) with safe walkways to facilities, garbage disposal and pick up, 24-7 emergency phone, pest control.
- Sites larger than 400 square feet need to be fully plumbed.

Due to these requirements set forth, the cost to implement and operate a safe parking program locally will have additional significant cost considerations. The program that most closely resembles the infrastructure required as well as the staffing needs for a local safe parking program in Dane County is Dairy Drive Campground operated by Madison Street Medicine.

Budget estimates for local safe parking program were based off of the Dairy Drive Campground budget and looked at both a 24/7 staffing model as well as an evening-only program staffing model.

**FIGURE 5: SAFE PARKING BUDGET ESTIMATE: 24/7 STAFFING**

Figure 5 illustrates the budget estimate for year one of a safe parking program for 30 vehicles that is operating 24/7 with full staffing.

Description	Total
M - F Daytime Housing/Mental Health Focused Social Worker, LCSW	\$ 85,280
M-F Daytime Housing/Substance Abuse Focused Social Worker	\$ 62,400
M-F Housing Focused Social Workers	\$ 52,000
M - F Evening 5pm - 2am, 6 hour shifts, holiday support	\$ 84,240
Weekend, 8 hour shifts Sat and Sunday	\$ 51,480
Program Coordinator	\$ 52,000
On call pay 11pm - 9am, holidays	\$ 45,000
<b>Total salaries</b>	<b>\$ 432,400</b>
Taxes	\$ 42,080

Benefits	\$	45,000
<b>Total Salaries + benefits</b>	<b>\$</b>	<b>519,480</b>
Client transportation - bus passes, license/registration, cabs as needed, vehicle repairs	\$	35,600
Mileage - housing, medical, SSI, ADRC, supplies, etc.	\$	28,800
Devices - phones, tablets, computer parts	\$	5,000
Phone Plans	\$	3,000
Basic Needs Supplies - pillow, blankets, laundry soap, etc.	\$	10,000
Cleaning supplies and toilet paper/hand towels etc.	\$	10,000
Internet/Site phone	\$	1,500
Handwashing Station (2)	\$	3,600
Dumpster	\$	2,715
Porta Potties (3)	\$	8,333
Snow Plow	\$	5,000
Supplemental Food	\$	20,000
Maintenance Supplies and Tools	\$	10,000
Security Cameras	\$	20,000
Showers	\$	30,000
Additional insurance requirements	\$	5,000
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>\$</b>	<b>718,028</b>
10% admin costs/unknowns - staff training, additional office space, accounting, phone system, single audit, office furniture	\$	71,803
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$</b>	<b>789,831</b>

**FIGURE 6: SAFE PARKING BUDGET ESTIMATE: EVENING ONLY STAFFING**

Figure 6 illustrates the budget estimate for year one of a safe parking program for 30 vehicles that is operating evening-only with evening-only staffing.

Description	Total
M-F Second Shift (2 positions)	\$ 83,200
M-F Third Shift (2 positions)	\$ 83,200
Weekend Case Manager, Second Shift	\$ 33,280
Weekend Case Manager, Third Shift	\$ 33,280
Program Coordinator	\$ 52,000
<b>Total salaries</b>	<b>\$ 284,960</b>
Taxes	\$ 33,620
Benefits	\$ 37,000

<b>Total Salaries + benefits</b>	<b>\$</b>	<b>355,580</b>
Client transportation - bus passes, license/registration, cabs as needed, vehicle repairs	\$	35,600
Mileage - housing, medical, SSI, ADRC, supplies, etc.	\$	14,000
Devices - phones, tablets, computer parts	\$	3,000
Phone Plans	\$	2,000
Basic Needs Supplies - pillow, blankets, laundry soap, etc.	\$	10,000
Cleaning supplies and toilet paper/hand towels etc.	\$	10,000
Internet/Site phone	\$	1,500
Handwashing Station (2)	\$	3,600
Dumpster	\$	2,715
Porta Potties (3)	\$	8,333
Snow Plow	\$	5,000
Supplemental Food	\$	20,000
Maintenance Supplies and Tools	\$	10,000
Security Cameras	\$	20,000
Showers	\$	30,000
Additional insurance requirements	\$	5,000
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>\$</b>	<b>536,328</b>
10% admin costs/unknowns - staff training, additional office space, accounting, phone system, single audit, office furniture	\$	53,633
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$</b>	<b>589,961</b>

## OTHER COST CONSIDERATIONS

In addition to the above costs, other program elements that could greatly impact the budget for a safe parking program including the following:

- Land costs
- Infrastructure costs needed for water, electricity, plumbing to comply with the campground regulations.
- Emergency weather hotel costs
- Utility usage
- Security company costs
- Fencing or a gate
- Towing of vehicles
- Cleaning costs
- Food costs
- Other specialized support service costs

## ALTERNATE PROGRAM RECOMMENDATIONS

While there is evidence that there is a need for additional services and supports for those who are experiencing car camping in Dane County, questions remain as to whether a safe parking program is the best intervention to adequately and appropriately meet the space and service needs for this population to provide stability.

Based on the research conducted by staff over the past two years regarding the legal requirements for campgrounds, the exploration of a feasible site for a safe parking program, the scope of the need, the feedback gathered from participants and providers as well as a consideration of the costs to develop and operate a safe parking program, a list of alternate strategies to safe parking are recommended to be explored below.

- Increase the shelter capacity in Dane County, particularly for families experiencing homelessness.
- Increase the capacity for domestic violence shelter beds.
- Continue working with shelter providers to lower the barriers for shelter
- Increase the hours of shelter operation
- Increase Street Outreach services and the amount of providers, potentially have designated Street Outreach for car campers.
- Increase homeless prevention funding (specifically eviction prevention and diversion funding).
- Policy changes
  - Identify law that criminalize car camping
  - Target screening requirements for housing