

MaryJane Shimsky**Legislator, 12th District****Majority Whip****Chair, Committee on Public Works**

Committee Assignments:

Appointments

Environment, Health & Energy

Law & Major Contracts

Legislation

Parks, Planning & Economic Development

Public Safety

Seniors & Constituencies

Social Services

MEMORANDUM

TO: Benjamin Boykin, Chair, Board of Legislators
FROM: MaryJane Shimsky, Legislator – 12th District
DATE: August 6th, 2018
RE: *Governing*: “It's the ‘New Form of Affordable Housing’: More People Are Living in Their Cars” by Mattie Quinn

Please add the attached *article* to the B&A, L&H and SS committees.

“It's the New Form of Affordable Housing': More People Are Living in Their Cars”

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With rents on the rise, cities are grappling with a growing population of "vehicular homelessness" -- a way of life considered illegal in many places.

When a homeless count was conducted in Seattle this year, the city realized that more people are living in their car than ever before and [46 percent more](#) than the year prior. In King County, which surrounds Seattle, around 25 percent of the homeless population is reported to live in their vehicles.

This phenomenon isn't unique to Seattle.

There's been an explosion in many major cities -- from Los Angeles to Portland, Ore., to San Francisco -- of "vehicular homelessness." The issue is of particular concern on the West Coast, where rents have skyrocketed and the number of homeless people who don't live in shelters [is up 20,000 from 2017](#).

“It's the new form of affordable housing,” says Sara Rankin, professor at Seattle University School of Law, who specializes in homeless rights advocacy.

The rise of people sleeping in their cars presents unique challenges for cities and homeless advocates.

"What do we do with people whose basic physiological needs are not being met? When we think about people who are living in their vehicles, are they able to sleep, eat, poop and breathe safely? We have to start asking what needs to be done," says Rankin.

Some cities have launched so-called safe parking programs to help this population. Meanwhile, other cities are exacerbating this population's problems by criminalizing their current way of life.

Under Los Angeles law, it is illegal to use a car as shelter on most city streets. The ordinance was eased last year but only for 10 percent of the city's streets and some of them are inaccessible -- one block is a canal that can only fit an amphibious vehicle, [reports the Los Angeles Times](#). Several cities in Washington have criminalized vehicular homelessness, including Aberdeen, Tacoma and Longview, according to Rankin.

While Seattle doesn't directly outlaw vehicle residency, Rankin found that the city does have 20 vehicle ordinances -- the most in Washington state -- that make a confusing, patchwork system for residents who live in their cars. Some of those ordinances have recently been tested in court.

A man who was living in his truck [sued](#) Seattle after it was impounded and expected to be sold if he didn't make payments to the city. A judge earlier this year sided with the man, ruling that because the truck was used as his home, impounding it violated a frontier-era law that forbids personal property from being sold by the government.

While not a long-term solution, many homeless advocates are urging cities to start more seriously thinking about safe parking programs -- in which certain lots are designated for people living out of their cars -- as vehicular homelessness continues to climb.

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Seattle's now-defunct safe parking program, they say, is an example of how not to run one.

Just six months after its launch in June 2016, the city deemed the safe parking program an "expensive failure" and ended it largely because people weren't being re-housed. *The Seattle Times* [reported](#) that despite the \$16,800-per-parking-lot-spot price tag, the city had allocated few resources for helping people find more permanent housing. Instead, peripheral costs like portable bathrooms and garbage collection ate away at the program's budget.

"They [city officials] told me there was no evaluative measures. They didn't sit down with any experts in homelessness. They had no plan, and then just called it an expensive failure," says Rankin, the professor. "The crying shame of it is now policymakers in the city are less supportive of the whole idea because there was one ill-conceived program."

Rankin, however, points to two cities that have smartly executed safe parking programs: San Diego and Santa Barbara, Calif.

'Not *That* Kind of Homeless'

San Diego's safe parking program kicked off in 2010 amid the Great Recession.

"We were seeing a new wave of [homeless] people we hadn't seen before. It wasn't generational poverty. These were people who would come to us and say 'we aren't *that* kind of homeless,'" says Teresa Smith, executive director of Dreams for Change, a local nonprofit that helps the homeless. "Seventy percent of our clients have some form on income. So how do we capitalize on that and prevent them from becoming chronically homeless?"

The nonprofit opened a lot for people to safely park their cars in which they were living and also linked them with a case manager that helps them secure long-term housing. The program has expanded to three lots, serving between 30 and 60 cars in each. The lots aim to feel like community centers with spots to cook simple meals and charge electronics. Smith says that residents often hang out and kids play together.

The nonprofit was mostly autonomous from the city until San Diego experienced a Hepatitis A outbreak among homeless people in 2017. City officials then came to Smith and offered a space and funding for the third lot, which opened last year.

Santa Barbara's safe parking program has been operational for more than a decade and started because a growing number of people living in RVs kept getting ticketed. Like San Diego, Santa Barbara relies heavily on case management when a vehicle comes into the lot. But unlike San Diego, the lots in Santa Barbara are much smaller -- only serving a handful of vehicles at each site.

"It's more private for people this way, it prevents gawking," says Cassie Roach, program coordinator of New Beginnings Counseling Center, the nonprofit that runs the safe parking program.

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While homeless advocates say safe parking programs are a necessity in cities with large numbers of people living in their cars, they stress that they are just a band-aid solution for a larger problem: lack of affordable housing across the country.

“The cost of housing is continually rising, but social service programs aren't having any increase in funding -- if anything, they are getting cut," says Roach. "People are making a living, but it's just not enough."