

A place for homeless families to sleep safely in their cars

How a group of interfaith partners is making use of their idle parking lots

by [Caitlin Yoshiko Kandil](#) in the [January 15, 2020](#) issue



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For one month of the year, Marc Farley heads to Prince of Peace Lutheran Church each morning before going to work. He unlocks a room, turns on the heat and a coffee machine, arranges a plate of pastries, and sets up a cell phone charging station. Then he opens the door to welcome more than a dozen homeless guests who spent the night sleeping in their cars on the church's parking lot.

Farley chats with many of them and learns their stories—the mother and son who laugh easily and fell into homelessness after a series of medical issues; the man who, despite his obvious intelligence, lacks the social skills to hold down a job; and the young man who lost his place to live after both of his parents died.

Farley is a volunteer with Rotating Safe Car Park, a program led by Prince of Peace that brings together nearly a dozen houses of worship in Saratoga, California, to

provide a secure and legal place for homeless guests to sleep in their vehicles each night. For him, the program is a simple way to help the growing homeless population in his hometown. It has also opened his eyes to the stark realities of homelessness in one of the richest parts of the world.

“It really brings home a lot of the humanity and suffering of real people, as opposed to the notion that, well, there might be something wrong with them, or there might be some reason why they’re homeless,” said Farley, who recently retired from a career in the tech industry. “And the answer is, no, there’s actually no good reason why they’re homeless. They just have bad luck. As Christians we’re called to be compassionate, and it raises the level of compassion when you see how people are living. They all deserve better.”

Saratoga is on the outskirts of Silicon Valley, the home of the tech giants Google, Facebook, and Apple. It is an area where the median value of a house is more than \$1 million. It is also a region that has witnessed rapidly growing homelessness. In response, dozens of local houses of worship have launched safe car park programs on their properties. It’s a relatively simple way of assisting the subset of the region’s homeless population that lives out of cars, vans, and recreational vehicles. Most churches already have the basic requirements for the program—bathrooms and an empty nighttime lot. Even though safe car parks alone can’t solve homelessness, Norman Puck, program director of the Rotating Safe Car Park, said they can provide immediate comfort and can help people stabilize so they don’t slip down even further and end up living on the streets.

“To me, it was a no-brainer,” Puck said. “At its most simple, it means opening up your parking lot and giving them access to bathrooms—how much overhead does that take?”

The idea for the Rotating Safe Car Park at Prince of Peace emerged in 2017. The church, which is predominantly white and affluent and has a median age of about 55, had been participating in a rotating winter shelter, taking turns with other faith communities to host homeless men in their fellowship halls for a few months of the year. When the program shut down two years ago, the church formed a task force to find a new way to serve. Members of the task force came across safe car parks, which have been hosted by faith communities up and down the West Coast, and were immediately drawn to the idea. They wanted to continue providing shelter to the homeless, instead of providing one-off services such as cooking meals or

donating clothing, but they also knew that building affordable housing or a permanent shelter was beyond their capabilities.

A safe car park also appealed spiritually, said Sara Pearson, pastor of Prince of Peace, because it would force the congregation to get to know its homeless neighbors. “The congregation is very generous with their money, but that’s the easiest way to give, because it’s very hands-off, it’s very comfortable,” she said. “I don’t begrudge anyone that, but when you have face-to-face interactions, your heart is changed by the stories.”

The end result was the Rotating Safe Car Park, which opened in 2018 and is thought to be the first of its kind in the area. Unlike most programs that operate out of individual churches, the Rotating Safe Car Park is run by nearly a dozen interfaith partners, including Catholic, Protestant, and Latter-day Saints churches as well as synagogues, which take turns hosting or providing support for a month of the year.

The rotation is a key strength of the program, said Puck—it means the workload is shared across many communities, burnout is reduced, and concerned neighbors have less room for objection since the program isn’t stationed anywhere permanently. Plus, Saratoga already had a long-standing interfaith network that Prince of Peace could recruit partners from.

Each night, the safe lot opens around 8 p.m., depending on the site, and volunteers from the hosting house of worship greet up to 30 guests. The host provides bathrooms—either in the house of worship or rented portable toilets—and some form of hospitality, whether it’s a meal cooked by members of the congregation, a pantry of nonperishable food and toiletries, social time with volunteers and other guests, or access to a microwave, refrigerator, and power outlets. In the morning, the host provides breakfast, coffee, or a bagged lunch, and guests leave around 8 a.m. No weapons, alcohol, or drugs are allowed on-site. After one month, the program picks up and moves on to another location.

While those who live in their cars are a minority of the area’s homeless—about 3,600 of nearly 10,000, according to the county’s point-in-time count—it’s also a fast-growing segment that has ballooned 146 percent in the past four years. Sujatha Venkatraman, associate executive director of West Valley Community Services, an agency that serves participants in the Rotating Safe Car Park, said most guests are working families and seniors who are unable to access shelters. Most local shelters,

she said, can't accommodate entire families, so parents often choose to sleep in their cars instead of splitting up from their kids. Most shelters also have strict 5 p.m. check-in times, making it difficult for people with jobs to arrive in time to reserve a bed. But sleeping in vehicles has its own risks.

One of the biggest challenges the leadership team of the Rotating Safe Car Park anticipated was NIMBY-ism ("not in my backyard") or the fear that sheltering the homeless will bring crime, blight, and lower property values to the neighborhood. So Puck, Pearson, and others on the team—none of whom had any formal experience in social work or homeless advocacy—immediately sought to partner with the city and other community organizations as a way to prevent backlash. They took the idea directly to city officials, who got on board and agreed to amend city regulations, which previously prohibited sleeping in cars overnight, to create an exception for those in the program. Pearson called it a pivotal moment.

"When you're standing up in city hall and you're making shifts in the law for the sake of justice—that's what I believe my call as pastor is," Pearson said. "I can give people food any day of the week, but changing the law to benefit them, changing the system is so hard and so slow."

The sheriff also agreed to patrol the lots and encouraged guests and volunteers to call the department's hotline if a problem arose, and two social service agencies agreed to refer to and provide screening for the program in order to exclude sex offenders and give guests access to case management.

The City of Saratoga gave the Rotating Safe Car Park a modest amount of funding and let the program proceed with a six-month pilot. The probationary period went by without incident, and the program became permanent. Now the Rotating Safe Car Park has 17 partners: 11 houses of worship and one community college that provide lots, volunteers, meals, and other forms of assistance, and five support partners, including the city, social service agencies, the sheriff, and a local YMCA that allows guests to use its showers. Puck attributes the program's continued success to this community backing.

Some congregations were fearful of bringing a dozen homeless people onto church property at night and were reluctant to get on board. Jani Wild, a priest at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, a partner that hosted the program in July, said her church's governing board and congregation initially expressed concern.

“It’s hard to get people to realize they need to love their neighbors no matter who their neighbors are,” she said. “The biggest thing was understanding who the guests were. There’s worry about the other person. There’s worry that they’re going to be disruptive, they’re going to be messy, they’re going to smell, and the facilities will get trashed. None of that happened, and none of that has happened at any of the churches.”

Wild said that once church members started getting to know the guests, their attitudes changed. St. Andrew’s hosts weekly summer barbeques and safe car park guests were also invited to attend, giving the opportunity for one-on-one conversations. Parishioners realized that often the only difference between them and the guests—who include college students, Uber drivers, and other local employees whose jobs don’t pay enough to meet the high cost of living—was one missed paycheck or one medical emergency. These conversations then prompted internal church discussions about expanding services. “We learned that we can give to our neighbors more than we think we can,” Wild said.

Prince of Peace also faced resistance at first. Farley, the volunteer, admitted he was initially skeptical of safe car parks because he worried the guests might be drug users or have behavior problems, and he didn’t understand the needs of the homeless who live out of their vehicles. “I had not thought of a population that might be homeless that have cars that are better than mine, or are the same as mine,” he said. “It didn’t gel with my mind-set of who homeless people were.” But Karen Hauschildt, a member of the Rotating Safe Car Park’s leadership team, said that like St. Andrew’s, once members of the congregation started getting to know the guests, their attitudes changed. Now, about 45 people in the 300-person congregation serve as volunteers for the program, she said.

“You’re meeting with these people, you’re interacting with them, and what ends up happening is relationships start to build and people want to do more,” Puck said. “After a while, we’re just supposed to have coffee, but then they realize so-and-so needs clothes, so those are coming in. Then they realize so-and-so needs a sleeping bag, so they’re bringing that in. The advantage is you’re connecting and truly welcoming your neighbor and giving them love on a very personal level. Now it’s a very personal connection.”

For many of the participating houses of worship, the Rotating Safe Car Park inspired new ways of supporting the homeless. Janice Thornburg, parish administrator for

Sacred Heart Catholic Church, which has hosted the car park, said that the parish is planning to convert its facilities into a month-long indoor shelter for homeless women. The success of the safe car park, Thornburg said, was “foundational” to the creation of the shelter.

“There was a sense of drawing together,” she said. “There’s always some hesitancy on some people’s part, but I’d say largely, there was a real pride in our community that we stepped up to the challenge. And in the end, it wasn’t a challenge—it was life giving.”

The Rotating Safe Car Park in Saratoga is not the only program in Silicon Valley. In Mountain View, home to Google’s headquarters, Lots of Love was formed after the county approached faith leaders about opening their parking lots to the homeless. Now, two churches make their parking lots available to four vehicles each—the limit, according to the city’s regulations—every night of the year from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. In its 16-month run, the program has served 20 people, more than half of whom have moved on to permanent housing, according to Brian Leong, pastor of Lord’s Grace Christian Church, one of Lots of Love’s host sites. Soon the program will expand to several new properties given by the city, including an unused bus terminal and amphitheater parking lot, he said. Church volunteers will staff the program.

Leong said that, as with other faith-based programs, convincing his congregation to get on board was initially difficult and required three months of “very intense” debate. And it wasn’t just his own church that resisted. He said local residents also put up a fight, ultimately leading one church that had initially agreed to host the program to drop out.

“Trying to get other churches on board has been harder than we thought,” he said. “We’ve had some churches go through the process of getting started, but they’ve run into [resistance from] church leadership or the neighborhoods, and they stopped it. It’s a little discouraging.”

While city officials once expressed hesitation to partner with Lord’s Grace, Leong said, now they’re eager to reach out to him for help on service projects. This year, for instance, he said the local school district called him to discuss how to help its estimated 138 homeless students who need a place to go after school. After some discussions, the church agreed to host a homework center in the afternoons for the students, and assembled a team of 100 tutors from nearby churches to assist them.

“The kind of relationships we have with the city, nonprofits, and regular people in the streets, the perception of who we are as followers of Christ has changed quite a bit, and that’s a great thing,” he said. “The city looks at churches as partners willing to step in.”

Another program is the Winter Faith Collaborative, a San Jose–based organization that enlists faith communities to shelter the homeless. Karen Gillette, who helps run the Winter Faith Collaborative, said the group began four years ago by setting up indoor shelters in houses of worship after the City of San Jose dismantled the largest homeless encampment in the region. Later, the organization expanded to include safe car parks at the request of several churches, since they’re easier to run, and typically cost less than \$100 per month to operate, she said. The Winter Faith Collaborative now works with 27 faith communities across the county, about a dozen of which host safe car parks.

Gillette said religious groups are uniquely advantaged to provide these services since they have protections that nonprofits and businesses don’t. “From a legal point of view, faith-based organizations are protected in terms of we have a right and an ability to live out our faith in the way we’re called to, and the government can’t prevent us from doing that,” she said, noting that the constitutional rights of religious groups supersedes local regulations on where the homeless can live or sleep or who can help them. “It’s important for people to look up what their rights are as faith communities.”

Looking forward, Puck said he hopes to help start up other new safe car parks, as well as to strengthen the existing one in Saratoga. He said he wants to continue adding new partners to ensure there’s no break in service throughout the year and, eventually, to add another rotation ring to Saratoga to double the program’s capacity.

Even as safe car parks spread, those involved know it’s not a long-term fix and that they won’t eliminate homelessness. “We’re like a Band-Aid until more housing gets built,” said Hauschildt, a leader with the Rotating Safe Car Park.

But sometimes a Band-Aid is what people need.

“When we first started this, people said, ‘How come you’re not donating money to build permanent housing?’” Puck said. “And I said, ‘Those are solutions, but immediately, how do we help people who are sleeping in their cars? The shelters are

full. Where do these people go? Silicon Valley is taking steps and the government is taking steps, but they're not there yet. It's going to take a village, and part of that village is faith-based organizations whose ministries can do this work. From my perspective, opening up a parking lot and offering hospitality services is the least we can do. And why not?"

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Room in the parking lot."