Safe Parking Program: Making a Home for People in Need
First Universalist Church of Denver

Mission
The Homelessness Task Force (HTF), by establishing and operating a safe parking site at First Universalist, will help people experiencing homelessness as they transition to stable housing.

Introduction and Need
It is difficult to determine the number of people experiencing homelessness and living in cars. It is an invisible population, staying in one location until forced to move by police officers enforcing city ordinances, then seeking another site, in the hopes they will not be awakened again.

However, some data exists. In the seven-county Denver area, the 2019 Point in Time Count identified 215 or 30% of all identified unsheltered individuals or families were living in their vehicles: likely an undercount. This suspected undercount is confirmed by a 2019 summer count of 140 vehicles used as residences in Longmont and a similar count in Jefferson County of 139 vehicles with 200 residents (including many children). All told, the seven-county Denver metro area may have 1,000 or more individuals living in vehicles. It is quite possible that the COVID crisis will create a wave of evictions and foreclosures this summer with a corresponding wave of newly homeless persons entering the system with their vehicles (and truly little experience of how to navigate life on the streets).

In an article in Westword, May 6, 2020, Allie Card from Family Promise described people evicted and living in cars:

“Folks experiencing homelessness for the first time sometimes feel like they are not the ones who should be using the system. It is a mindset of, ‘I don’t have it quite as bad, so I don’t want to use that resource if I don’t have to; I’ll just stay in my car.’ If I were going through that experience, that’s probably one of the first thoughts I would have.”

Who is working on this problem?
The initiative to find a safe place for people experiencing homelessness in vehicles is called the Safe Parking Program (SPP). A key group taking the lead is the Colorado Safe Parking Initiative
(CSPI) https://www.colosafeparking.org/. The Homelessness Task Force at First Universalist (HTF) has been in frequent touch with CSPI and now attends their monthly meetings. CSPI is assisting HTF by providing advice and contacts with other groups working on the same issue.

There are currently five Safe Parking sites in metro Denver. HOPE for Longmont is located at a Presbyterian Church in Longmont. There are two sites in Broomfield, one that allows campers to park. Two other Safe Parking sites can be found in Golden and Arvada. We visited the sites in Longmont and Arvada and their experience informs our proposal.

**Proposal to establish a SPP program at First Universalist Church**

The First Universalist Homelessness Taskforce proposes to open a SPP program at our church. This effort is supported by the Church Social Justice Council and was approved unanimously at their meeting in October 2020, and again in January 2021. The Church Operations Council approved the proposal in January 2021.

**First Universalist management of SPP**

First Universalist Church will have autonomy over the program. As a member of CSPI receiving their services, such as gathering and vetting applications, training, and basic operation, we must adhere to the CSPI standards. HTF reviewed these standards and believe we can meet them. These can be reviewed at https://www.colosafeparking.org/resources#getting-started.

**Location on Church Property**

We recommend that the SPP space be in the Church north parking lot (see attached photos). This space provides privacy for the parked cars and does not advertise the location. The existence of a SPP at First Universalist will only be known by members of our congregation, nearby neighbors, and necessary service providers such as police, fire departments, and any organizations providing services to our SPP Guests.

**Maximum number of cars**

CSPI recommends a maximum of 10 vehicles. We recommend beginning with no more than eight vehicles and expanding or contracting as warranted by our experience. Each SPP Guest will receive a parking permit to hang on the rear-view mirror that authorizes their parking in our SPP and assigns the vehicle to a specific spot within the parking lot.

Experience has shown that the number of cars at each site grows slowly. All eight cars will not be admitted at the same time. This will give First Universalist time to deal with any issues that occur early in the program. It will also allow a community feeling among the participants to grow slowly as new SPP Guests are added.
How long will an individual SPP Guest stay in the First U parking lot?
To enter the program, SPP Guests will be expected to have a plan for moving to stable housing. CSPI will assist in this effort. We expect SPP Guests to stay about 4-6 months. However, there is no actual limit on the length of an individual’s stay.

Hours of Operation
We recommend 6pm until 8am. Cars cannot arrive prior to 6pm and must leave no later than 8am. From 10pm until 5am there will be Quiet Time and no SPP Guest will be allowed in after 10pm without permission. A sign and moveable barriers will be placed at night indicating private parking from 6pm to 8am. We understand that OLLI will schedule classes in the morning with some OLLI staff arriving early. We expect that the SPP Guests will have left our lot by the time OLLI students arrive.

Priority for inclusion
Based on CSPI data, we suggest that we take only adults with a maximum of two people per car. We will not discriminate based on race, ethnicity, disability, sex, or sexual identity. We recommend we do not accept families with small children.

Vetting of applicants to participate in the First Universalist SPP program
CSPI has a system for accepting applicants, interviewing them with a set of standard questions, and conducting a background check in Colorado. CSPI will refer applicants to First U that CSPI believes will fit into our program requirements and for whom our location is close to their work or medical needs. The HTF will then have the opportunity to interview people and ask our own set of additional questions. We prefer people who have been in Colorado for a sufficient period of time. If we wish to conduct a national vetting, HTF will have to pay this cost, about $40 per person. For a lower cost, if we wish, we can check the most recent state an applicant came from.

All people staying in a car will be identified and vetted and ONLY those people may stay in the car. There are no outside guests allowed to visit or spend the night.

Covenant
All SPP Guests will be required to sign a Covenant of Behavior. Violation of the Covenant will result in either a warning for minor issues (skipping nights without notification), or immediate eviction for major issues such as drugs, alcohol, or violence on site.

Pets
Pets will be allowed when a car is accepted in the program, but no new pets will be allowed without specific approval. Pets must be quiet and not aggressive. One pet per vehicle is preferred with a maximum of two allowed. All dogs and cats must have rabies shots and be
licensed. We will work with the Denver Dumb Friends League to help SPP Guests get rabies shots for their pets.

Sanitation

Porta-Potty. An ADA approved Porta-Potty and sanitation station will be provided, and access limited only to our SPP Guests, most likely by a combination lock although this has not yet been confirmed. CSPI is exploring a contract with a Porta-potty company for a reduced rate.

Water access. Water will be provided from an outdoor facet.

Wastewater. No site so far has reported an issue with wastewater. However, we are looking into a method of handling wastewater if it occurs.

Trash. We will provide a trash barrel for the SPP Guests. This trash should be combined with the First Universalist locked trash container on a regular basis. We recommend that one of our SPP Guests be assigned this responsibility or a member of the HTF can do this.

Showers. There are several options for showers. We are developing a plan for SPP Guests to use the church shower during scheduled times. Volunteers will monitor this access. We are also looking into memberships at Planet Fitness to give our Guests more regular access to showers.

COVID19. As part of the covenant, we will require full adherence to COVID19 restrictions including masks outside the car, social distancing from people in other cars, and frequent sanitation.

Security

Overnight Safety

We considered hiring staff who would spend the night at the site for purposes of security. However, we explored the experience of other SPP sites regarding security at the sites. Experience from other SPP programs has shown that within a short period of time:

- The group unified into a community that manages itself because they value the safe parking opportunity.
- There have been few violations of the Covenant and any violations were reported to SPP volunteer leaders.
- Any SPP Guest violating their signed covenant has been identified, warned, or evicted.
- In other programs, the overnight staff have found they have nothing to do.

As each new SPP Guest arrives, a First U volunteer will greet them, go over the covenant, give them a tour of the site, introduce them to other SPP Guests, and make them feel welcome. At the beginning we will have a volunteer there every night until 10 pm for a week. Based on our
experience we will either increase or decrease that length of time for this initial monitoring. For a similar period of time, we will ask a volunteer to drive by the church and make sure people are leaving at their required time in the morning.

There will be a First Universalist volunteer assigned as the lead contact for a set period of time (probably a two-week period). SPP Guests will be asked to text the contact person each evening to verify their arrival and let the contact person know if there are any problems.

Our Church has four outdoor cameras with each facing one direction – north, south, east, and west from our building. The north-facing camera is being enhanced to give a broader and clearer view of the north parking lot. The camera records every night and saves the recordings for one month. With an app on our cell phones, members of the Task Force and our Church Administrator can monitor live events in the north lot. This will provide protection for the SPP Guests and the church.

**Police and Fire Support**
Our Church is within the jurisdiction of the District Three Police Station at 1625 S. University Blvd. Our Task Force will inform them of our plans. The Church is also one mile from Denver Fire Department Station 24 at 2695 South Colorado Blvd. Our Task Force will inform Station 24 of our plans.

**Staffing**
The Homelessness Task Force will recruit volunteers to provide needed services. CSPI has a training program in place to train HTF volunteers on working with people experiencing homelessness who may have experienced trauma in their lives.

**Church and CSPI Services**

*Navigation Services.* This is the term used to aid people experiencing homelessness to find jobs, health services, and stable housing. We are currently gathering this information. We know that the Gathering Place, Coalition for the Homeless, and the Stout Street Clinic provide counseling services. Guests can also use the Gathering Place to receive mail as they will not be allowed to receive mail at the First U address. CSPI will also begin offering Navigation Services. First Universalist will provide a list of navigation services available.

*Wi-Fi.* The church wi-fi will be available to the SPP Guests.

*Electricity.* SPP Guests would use an outside outlet from the Church.

*Nearby community services*

*Laundromats.* There are two laundromats close to First Universalist.
**Veterinarians.** The Task Force is working with the Denver Dumb Friends League at 2080 South Quebec Street in Denver to arrange free or low-cost veterinary services including rabies shots for cats and dogs.

**Nearby parks.** Magna Carta Park is on the west property line of our Church. Our SPP Guests can use the park, its playground, the five picnic tables and two grills within Magna Carta Park. We will inform our SPP Guests of park rules, which are posted near our Church parking lot. Mamie Eisenhower Park is about one-half mile north of our Church, and its recreation center may soon be open again.

**Library services.** The Denver Public Library University Hills Branch, 4310 East Amherst Avenue, is nearby and, although currently closed, it does provide guidance on multiple community services including health, housing, and food banks. Some branches have social workers on staff to assist people. provides Wi-Fi service during the day and some have ESL and immigrant services.

**Grocery stores.** The nearest grocery stores are Sprouts Farmers Market and King Soopers less than one mile north on Colorado Blvd. There is also a Walgreens drug store and pharmacy beside Sprouts.

**Use of church**
We are not planning to use the church facilities at this time. Future use might include showers or laundering.

**Church Insurance**
The covenant signed by the SPP guests answers the questions asked by the church’s insurance company.

**Zoning**
The city of Denver currently prohibits overnight parking, even in a church parking lot. We will apply for a temporary emergency-use permit. CSPI, the University of Denver Law School, and a pro bono attorney will assist with the application. CSPI and the University are also advocating for a permanent approval of SPP programs.

**Involvement of community**
CSPI has guidelines for community involvement (see with templates and flyers and other materials we can use to inform our neighbors of our plans. [https://www.colosafeparking.org/resources#community-outreach](https://www.colosafeparking.org/resources#community-outreach)). We will provide flyers and other materials to inform our neighbors and host facilitated Zoom meetings to answer neighbor
questions and learn of any issues we might resolve. We will provide the neighbors with phone numbers of Task Force members who can be informed if any issues arise.

Other churches are active with CSPI, and some of them may partner with our Church to provide meals and other services for our SPP Guests. The Task Force will also ask for meal donations from local restaurants, and our Church members may also volunteer to prepare some meals for our Guests. In other Safe Parking Programs, neighbors have volunteered to help the Guests.

**Evaluation**

The University of Denver Law School is conducting a long-term evaluation of SPP Guests. They ask new SPP Guests to complete a survey and provide a $20 gift card as an incentive. They ask them to also complete the survey as they leave SPP, again with a $20 gift card as an incentive. In addition, we will evaluate in two ways: operation and outcomes.

- Was First Universalist able to obtain sufficient support and volunteers to initiate the program?
- After six months, is SPP operating smoothly with less than 5 complaints from SPP Guests, community, or staff?
- After two months, have the SPP Guests formed their own community of support?
- After six months, have at least one-third of the SPP Guests found stable housing?

**Estimated Cost**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cost</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$1885</td>
<td>One-year ADA compliant Porta-potty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$60</td>
<td>set up and removal and damage waiver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$150</td>
<td>rental each additional month, including weekly empty/restock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$5</td>
<td>per month for 5 months winterization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$200</td>
<td>Additional vetting, as needed (e.g., out of state inquiries)</td>
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<tr>
<td>$400</td>
<td>Trash container (<em>estimate, may be less</em>)</td>
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<tr>
<td>$500</td>
<td>Signs to indicate parking spots</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$60</td>
<td>Removable barriers to show reserved parking</td>
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<tr>
<td>$10</td>
<td>Permit from city</td>
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<tr>
<td>$200</td>
<td>Miscellaneous for services for SPP Guests</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>$3255</strong></td>
<td><strong>Total (<em>estimate</em>)</strong></td>
</tr>
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In-kind contributions

- Church electricity
- Internet access
- Church water (from outside)
- Showers in the future
- Trash pick-up
- Volunteer time
• Cost of food and supplies, if provided in the future.

We are currently seeking sources of funding for these costs. First Universalist has allocated funding in next year’s budget. CSPI has indicated they will assist in seeking funding and, as a member of CSPI, we are eligible for a portion of any grants CSPI receives.

**Timeline**

- **February**
  - Apply for temporary license
  - Begin fundraising with CSPI
  - Present to congregation during a Coffee Hour breakout sessions

- **March/April**
  - Present to congregation during Coffee Hour a second time
  - Reach out to neighborhood with visits and zoom meeting

- **May/June**
  - Once money is obtained, begin implementation with help of CSPI