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CITY LIGHTS INSTALLATION THE GONDOLA COMPANY SAFE PARKING PROGRAM



“
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The JFS Safe Parking Program is a Winner

by Susan Edelstein

Jewish Family Service of San Diego was founded in 1918 and is one of the most impactful organizations in the county, providing care and assistance to more than 70,000 people each year. JFS is a people-centered nonprofit committed to a single, shared goal — helping people in need to move forward and making families and our whole community stronger.

Among the many programs and support services offered is the Safe Parking Program, which operates seven nights a week, 365 days a year, in six

locations throughout San Diego County where individuals and families living out of their vehicles can park in safety and sleep feeling secure.

Lack of Affordable Housing

The causes of homelessness are many: loss of a job or a partner, illness or injury, domestic violence, and the fact that everything costs way more today than people can afford, especially housing.

Nichole McCune, co-director of Safe Parking Program and manager of four of the county's six lots, says housing is the



biggest challenge facing the SPP's nightly guests. "The number one issue is the lack of affordable housing for our guests.

Unfortunately, there is a much bigger need than available units. Housing is very expensive, and there are many barriers to (re)entry, including the first and last months' rent deposits, income requirements, credit requirements and more."

For many people experiencing the loss of a home for the first time, the only thing they have that can help to maintain some comfort is their car. If they can keep their vehicle, there is a way to get to work and get kids to school, but how to keep safe at night is an overwhelming worry.

The Safe Parking Program ends that worry and helps with so much more. The lots are clean, safe, gated and guarded, and there is staff on hand to greet and

assist the guests. Basic needs are met first. At the Balboa Avenue location, there is a clean, bright, modern market reminiscent of Trader Joe's, where fresh food and many other everyday necessities (like diapers and toothpaste) are in abundance. Outside the market is a welcoming spot with tables and chairs where people can sit, relax and nourish. Next to this is a place for children to play; there are outside toys and sidewalk chalk. Pets are also welcome here.

Full bellies and a moment's rest at the end of the day, just watching kids play or petting the dog, are simple pleasures that most of us take for granted. The restrooms are new and spacious, with baby stations where your baby is safe and visible while you shower. There is comfort and dignity in being able to get ready for work, get the kids ready for

school and feel like you're part of a group of worthy people all striving to get back on their feet and into stable housing.

Length of Stay in Program

The length of time guests spend in the program before securing housing can vary. "Every person in the Safe Parking Program has a unique situation, and we make a plan with them based on their circumstances," says Nichole. "The average length of stay varies greatly as some guests are disabled or seniors on a fixed income waiting for an affordable housing unit, while some guests just need a temporary place to stay for three to four months to save money to enter back into more stable housing. Challenges guests often face include a low-volume of available, affordable rental units or

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a low credit score that prohibits someone from meeting income requirements for a rental agreement, especially when they require two or three times the monthly rent.”

Trailers for Families

The Rose Canyon location has trailers where families can stay. Norma, a mother I spoke with, and her husband have seven children, and they stayed in a Rose Canyon trailer for three months while waiting for a house. When their living conditions in LA became unbearable, Norma found the Safe Parking Program online, and because her mother and brother live in San Diego, they decided to move south. In the trailer, they could cook and bathe, and the children stayed in school online. Norma’s husband found work quickly but continues to seek more permanent, full-time work.

The family has moved into a seven-bedroom house and all are thriving. The kids all have their own bedrooms, except the two boys who share. Household needs like beds and bedding, kitchen supplies, including a refrigerator and other furniture, have been donated through many sources, such as Walmart. The kids are now in schools they love: Lincoln High School, Millennial Tech Middle, and an elementary school right across the street. Living close to her mother and brother means a lot to Norma, and the family gets together almost every weekend for BBQs. Norma’s mother is able to help out with the children. Clothing and school supplies are still pressing needs, but Norma is so grateful for their new stability and says, “It feels like a long way from homelessness. It feels like success, a blessing.”

Safety, Support...Success

At the Balboa Avenue location, daytime staff leave at 5:30 p.m. and guests begin arriving at 6:00 p.m. Program team members talk with the guests and case managers figure out the next steps for individuals and families. The goal of the team members and volunteers



A trailer at the Rose Canyon location.

is to meet people where they are and solve problems one at a time until stable housing is secured. The program provides for medical needs and family wellness, helps with employment and school success, and offers financial education from opening a bank account to benefits applications to credit repair. The program will even help with car payments and repairs. The ultimate goal is always a return to stability.

“The Safe Parking Program team works with each participant to determine their housing needs and what they are eligible for. Some just need help reconnecting with a relative who can help support them. For others, JFS collaborates with guests to find stable employment, increase savings and credit scores by providing financial literacy education, assist with housing navigation for section 8, rapid rehousing, room rentals and non-subsidy units,” says Nichole. “In general, JFS provides supportive services to participants to create a pathway out of homelessness.”

The program has its rules: Participants must be 18+ or minors accompanied by adult caregivers. JFS case managers meet with clients individually over the phone and screen

for eligibility in advance of any entry to the lot. Those interested must have a working vehicle and must follow the program guidelines for basic health and safety. The overnight lots’ hours are 6:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m. Participants come in during entry hours, and can leave at any time. The lots in Mission Valley and Rose Canyon are open 24/7. Drug and/or alcohol use is not permitted in the Safe Parking Program. All adults are run through the Megan’s Law database and the National Sex Offender Registry.

Nichole shared what she finds most rewarding about her job. “I love to work with our guests and increase their quality of life — from helping guests to feel like they have a safe place to stay free from stigma and harm to providing meals and vital resources. Our team celebrates each family and individual that we are able to assist with stable re-housing. As of June 2024, the program has assisted more than 5,200 individuals and 3,800 households since its start in January 2018. I’m really proud that, to date, more than one-third of participants have moved into more secure housing.”

I agree with Norma, the JFS Safe Parking Program feels like success and a blessing. ✨