

Public Health Associated with Homeless Encampments on Department Owned Rights of Way

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Executive Summary

Authorizing Statute

This report provides the background, context and data about the Public Health Associated with Homeless Encampments on Department owned Rights of Way initiative program to satisfy the reporting requirements in the [23-25 Supplemental Transportation Budget, ESHB 2134 Section 216 \(3\)](#):

- a. \$9,000,000 of the motor vehicle account—state appropriation is provided solely for the department to address the risks to safety and public health associated with homeless encampments on department owned rights-of-way. The department must coordinate and work with local government officials and social service organizations who provide services and direct people to housing alternatives that are not in highway rights-of-way to help prevent future encampments from forming on highway rights-of-way and may reimburse the organizations doing this outreach assistance who transition people into treatment or housing or for debris clean up on highway rights-of-way. A minimum of \$2,000,000 of this appropriation must be used to deliver more frequent removal of litter on the highway rights-of-way that is generated by unsheltered people and may be used to hire crews specializing in collecting and disposing of garbage, clearing debris or hazardous material, and implementing safety improvements either reimburse local law enforcement costs or the Washington state patrol if they are providing enhanced safety to department where hazards exist to the traveling public and department employees. The department may use these funds to staff during debris cleanup or during efforts to prevent future encampments from forming on highway rights-of-way.
- b. Beginning November 1, 2023, and semiannually thereafter, the Washington state patrol and the department of transportation must jointly submit a report to the governor and the transportation

committees of the legislature on the status of these efforts, including:

- i. A summary of the activities related to addressing encampments, including information on arrangements with local governments or other entities related to these activities.
- ii. A description of the planned activities in the ensuing two quarters to further address the emergency hazards and risks along state highway rights-of-way; and
- iii. Recommendations for executive branch or legislative action to achieve the desired outcome of reduced emergency hazards and risks along state highway rights-of-way.

Overview

Homelessness is a complex societal issue that WSDOT is unable to address alone. The current homelessness crisis is a result of lack of affordable housing including both temporary and permanent housing options for people living unhoused. This is a local and national issue – not just to Washington and not just on Washington State Department of Transportation rights of way. While we've had some successes stabilizing and/or clearing some right of way encampment sites, WSDOT is not equipped to resolve the underlying causes of homelessness alone. WSDOT's approach to homelessness recognizes that the agency is but one leg of the stool of services that must be provided to connect people to safe and stable housing and get them the resources they need to achieve housing stability indoors.

While our early efforts and partnerships have been successful in recent years, there is more work to do. Additional resources are needed for all parties involved, including local jurisdictions, social service providers, affordable housing providers and, when needed, law enforcement. Due to funding limitations, WSDOT cannot support large-scale site cleanups for the rest of the 2023-2025 biennium. Absent additional funding, site cleanups following the offer of social services are

on pause due to lack of funds. Long-term solutions require more temporary and permanent housing, and WSDOT will continue advocating for these needs with lawmakers who set agency priorities and budgets.

WSDOT Encampment Provisos

Overall, WSDOT's Maintenance Operations Program receives five provisos to address various aspects of homeless encampments on state right of way. Four are directed to be spent in specific cities: Seattle, Tacoma, Fife and Spokane.

This report focuses on the work done under the fifth proviso: The Public Health Associated with Homeless Encampments on Department Owned Rights of Way. This proviso is for work statewide.

It is important to note that the WSDOT proviso work and funding is separate – though similar – to the work done under the state Encampment Resolution Program, formerly known as the state Right of Way

Safety Initiative proviso. The ERP program provides funding to the Department of Commerce and created partnerships with WSDOT, the Washington State Patrol and local service providers (see section below for synopsis of ERP work). While separate programs, some of the WSDOT-specific funding, including city-specific and statewide funding – is at times used to support efforts at ERP sites that qualify under both proviso efforts.

Given the ongoing ERP needs and costs (WSDOT staff and equipment and overtime for WSP officers), WSDOT asked for additional funding to the statewide public health proviso during the first supplemental budget request. WSDOT had \$7 million in the existing proviso and requested another \$10 million; the Legislature was able to provide \$2 million, for a new biennium total of \$9 million for the statewide proviso work.

This additional funding allowed WSDOT to maintain existing agreements with cities and law enforcement – it did not allow for additional agreements or large encampment work. WSDOT has largely focused on

site remediation. WSDOT highway maintenance crews continue to monitor previously cleared sites in an effort to prevent new encampments from forming.

WSDOT highway maintenance crews are responsible for maintaining and preserving the state's transportation system. That work includes crews conducting pothole repairs, guardrail repairs, striping, clearing catch basins or clogged culverts, vegetation management, safety rest area maintenance, mowing for sightlines, snow and ice removal, sign washing and responding to real-time emergencies. Agency road crews are not suitable nor the trained subject matter experts to be social service providers, licensed counselors or law enforcement personnel. The department relies heavily on other state agencies, non-profit, local jurisdictional and behavioral health partners to take action before a site can be cleaned.

There are four actions that allow encampments to be removed from WSDOT right of way:

1. The offering of shelter and services to people living there
2. Storage of their belongings
3. Safety and security for people on site and work crews
4. Restoration and cleanup of the property

WSDOT's responsibility and expertise is limited to the last action, the clean-up of right of way. As such, the agency must rely on partnerships with local jurisdictions, law enforcement and social services when addressing any area with an encampment. The largest need is for creation of safe, secure housing options for people experiencing homelessness, which is well beyond the expertise, ability or funding of a transportation agency. WSDOT engages with a variety of partners when there is an immediate safety threat at a particular encampment on state right of way. Given the number of encampments and limited resources, the agency is unable to address all of them with the care, compassion and resources such work requires.

Funding Data

Previous versions of the agency’s encampment reports on WSDOT’s approach to homelessness and progress can be found online at Legislative reports WSDOT , with the most recent being the November 2024 proviso report.

WSDOT’s Maintenance Operations Program was appropriated several separate funding amounts to address encampments on state right of way to improve safety. This funding is for the 2023-2025

biennium. Costs include WSDOT maintenance crews and contractor time, equipment, disposal fees and reimbursing WSP for overtime and equipment costs to assist with security. The costs reported below are associated with the five proviso funds specific to WSDOT’s Maintenance Operations Program only. There are additional encampment-related costs incurred by other parts of WSDOT, including active construction projects that are not represented in this report.

Proviso Funding Amounts

Appropriation Name	Allocation	Biennium to Date Close of Feb. 2025
City of Seattle*	\$1,025,000	\$1,025,000
City of Tacoma*	\$1,015,000	\$897,000
City of Fife*	\$1,500,000	\$621,000
City of Spokane*	\$1,000,000	\$531,000
Statewide Public Health	\$9,000,000	\$7,736,000
Total	\$13,540,000	\$10,810,000

** Separate proviso but with similar scope of work and not part of the ERP.*

Law Enforcement Support and Presence at Encampment Cleanups

Lack of enough safe, stable housing for people living unsheltered on WSDOT right of way – housing availability is the biggest obstacle in resolving the challenge of homelessness.

A variety of available housing options is ideal for moving a large encampment because of mental health, domestic violence security, privacy and other concerns that prevent some residents from functioning in a congregate shelter.

Jurisdictional, law enforcement and behavioral health partnerships are vital to lasting change and reducing the footprint of an encampment, with the goal of closing a known site altogether. Without this approach, people will often cut fencing to return to a cleared site or simply move to a new spot within hours of a cleaning a location.



WSP officer supporting WSDOT at encampments along state right of way.

Freeways and roadsides were not designed to safely support encampments along the right of way. Both WSP and WSDOT know, sometimes from tragic experience, that it's not safe nor humane for individuals to live along state rights of way. This is true for all users, the unsheltered population, neighboring communities and the traveling public. WSP, other law enforcement partners and first responders addresses criminality and public safety concerns.

The current method of preventing re-encampments over time includes site-level modification, monitoring

and trespass enforcement. However, these are not sustainable long-term strategies. Washington's affordable housing crisis is consistent with what other cities, counties and states experience. Homelessness also has many social and cultural challenges that contribute to an increasing number of people living outside which makes it a challenge that requires an all-of-society response to be successfully addressed. To that end, the current levels of thoughtful collaboration and focused determination by WSP and WSDOT are working towards the best pathways currently available.



WSP officer supporting WSDOT at encampments along SR 512 & SR 509

Notable Achievements

Working closely with local governments, law enforcement and service providers, several previously occupied sites have been cleared. This work is not simply “sweeping” people from one area to another. It

involves weeks of outreach, strategy and necessary housing (where available, unless part of an Encampment Resolution Program site) to get to this point. Some successful achievements of closed sites are shown below:

SR 512 Mile Post 3.6 Encampment Closed (Olympic Region)

Before



Encampment closed and cleaned by WSDOT along SR 512.

After



SR 512 Mile Post 3.6 Encampment Closed (Olympic Region)

Before



WSDOT using tools during encampment clean up keeping staff safe while being efficient to get the work done.

After



SR 82 Mile Post 33.5 Fence Restoration (South Central Region)

Before



After



Right of way fence repairs preventing access to SR 82 by pedestrians after encampment site clean-up.

Working with the City of Vancouver (Southwest Region)

Before



After



24 people from the SR 501/Mill Plain Sound Wall were transitioned into Safe Stay/Park communities.

These successful transformations are not just property restoration – they represent positive outcomes for people formerly living unhoused on state rights of way. It also shows the need to provide more services and housing to Washington’s most vulnerable populations. Many locations have been successfully cleaned and are being monitored by WSDOT crews and law enforcement to help prevent new encampments. Site monitoring is an ongoing effort.

As new individuals try to reestablish a presence in an encampment, there is a “footprint” left that must be resolved. This requires crews to again clean and repair the site as well as repost ‘no trespass’ signs as it’s removed. WSDOT crews often are the first to notice indications of new people moving onto a cleared site. Crews also can observe or document damage to fencing or other items that need repair. Finally, WSDOT crews work with law enforcement to help enforce trespass laws at the site to prevent re-establishment. This repetitive work is more cost effective than if an encampment is re-established. Ultimately, site monitoring and repairs are a continual cost (not just from the initial site cleanup). This ongoing effort pulls WSDOT and WSP staff away from other critical highway activities mentioned earlier in this document.

Highlights and Challenges

Based on current needs and available funding, the Public Health Associated with Homeless Encampments on Department Owned Rights of Way funding is going to run out before the end of the biennium. As a result, this has required WSDOT

adjust focus of new cleanup efforts, to site monitoring with the intent of preventing new encampments from forming at previously cleared locations.

Inconsistent funding severely reduces and diminishes site restoration and cleanup efforts for all partners involved. Steady Funding to partners and service providers would help continue this goal on a state wide level.

Lack of enough safe, stable housing for people living unsheltered on WSDOT right of way remains an issue. Housing availability is the biggest obstacle in resolving the challenge of homelessness.

A variety of available housing options is ideal for moving a large encampment of people because of mental health, domestic violence, security, privacy and other concerns. These concerns can prevent some residents from functioning in a congregate shelter.

Jurisdictional, law enforcement and behavioral health partnerships are vital to lasting change. Law enforcement support reduces the footprint of an encampment, with the goal of closing known sites altogether. Without this approach, people will often cut fencing to return to a cleared site or simply move to a new spot within hours of a location being cleaned.

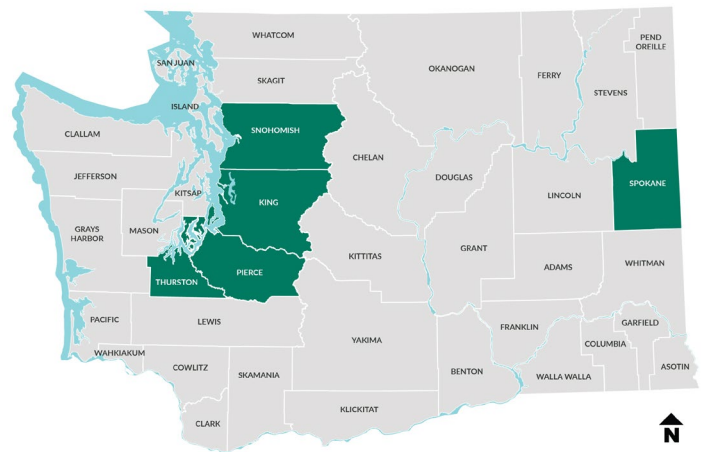
Encampment Resolution Program Synopsis

As noted above, the work under the Encampment Resolution Program, formerly known as the Right of Way Safety Initiative, is similar in general approach but is separate from the WSDOT-specific funding provided in the Maintenance Program.

The ERP provides funding to the state Department of Commerce and includes a partnership between

Commerce, WSDOT, WSP and many local governments and/or service providers. It is initially focused on five counties: King, Pierce, Thurston, Snohomish and Spokane. Comprehensive reporting on the ERP will be provided by Commerce in a separate report.

The legislative language requires offers of shelter/housing be made to everyone in an encampment site before it can be cleared and that the housing should be a “meaningful improvement over the individual’s current living situation” and be “well-matched to an individual’s assessed needs.” This is labor- and time-intensive work by service providers but has been found to be the best chance for long-term success in putting people on a path of success. More information is available in the WSDOT blog on the efforts that rely on available shelter/housing being available in each jurisdiction.



As of March 31, 2025, work has taken place or begun on 73 locations under the ERP, with 71 sites closed. Statewide, 1,703 people at these sites have accepted housing offers through the program. (Tallies for Spokane and Pierce counties are not updated)

Moving Forward

Each site and community are different, which is why it's so important to have meaningful, productive partnerships with local governments and outreach groups. The local governments and outreach partners play key roles because they're able to identify their local needs as well as have the connections with area providers who can help meet those needs on the ground.

Based on this direction and remaining available funding, WSDOT continues communication with other organizational partners and jurisdictions who may be interested in working together using this model. WSDOT cleanup activities are on-going in areas where social services have been provided, where planned or reactive maintenance work needs to occur and in areas where emergent safety concerns have been identified. This includes work in locations with vacated encampments and in situations with immediate danger to WSDOT crews, contracted staff or the public.

Agency Recommendations

Addressing homeless encampments on state-owned right of way must be a partnership and multi-agency response. WSDOT does not have the staff, resources or expertise to combat the underlying causes of homelessness alone – nor is that appropriate for our maintenance personnel to do so. The agency also does not have a real-time census count of encampments and lacks the resources, staffing and training of the social service providers who can accomplish this task.

This work requires consistent funding in place for all partners – especially including increased and varied types of housing to meet all the needs of the people experiencing homelessness. There is also a recurring expense for ongoing monitoring of existing sites to ensure property is not damaged and sightlines remain appropriate to discourage re-encampment.

Providing funding directly to partners will ensure consistent work can be accomplished and therefore provide more information about outcomes and where efforts may be improved. That additional expertise is needed to help quantify the overall needs at every level (state government, local governments, social services and community organizations) to achieve the proviso's objectives.