



**Washington State
Department of Transportation**

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 Operating Budget Section 216 \(3\)](#):

ESHB 2134 Pg.68

Section 216. subsection (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. While meaningful work, WSDOT does not have any more funding available for new site cleanups for the remainder of the 2023-2025 biennium. This work takes time and cannot be solved overnight. Moving forward, the overall need is for more temporary and long-term housing. This work also comes at a cost. WSDOT will continue to share these concerns with law makers who set agency priorities and budgets.

This report focuses on the work done under the Maintenance Operations Program provisos for WSDOT to address encampments on rights of way. It is important to note that this 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 Encampment Resolution Program provided funding to the Department of Commerce and created partnerships with WSDOT, Washington State Patrol and local service providers (see section below for synopsis of ERP work). Some of the WSDOT-specific funding, including city-specific funding – is at times used to support efforts at ERP sites that qualify under both proviso efforts. Because of the ERP proviso needs and costs, this proviso's 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. This has required WSDOT to stop most cleanup efforts and focus solely on monitoring previously cleared sites with the intent of preventing new encampments from forming.

WSDOT maintenance crews are responsible for maintaining and preserving the state's transportation system. That work includes crews conducting pothole repairs, 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 our right of way but 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.

LAW ENFORCEMENT SUPPORT AND PRESENCE OF ENCAMPMENT CLEANUPS

WSP plays an important role in assisting people who live along the state rights of way. As the enforcement agency for state highways, WSP troopers provide a secure environment for WSDOT crews to mitigate a site after it has been posted for cleaning.

Troopers also partner with local law enforcement personnel and first responders to address reported crimes and other public safety concerns at known encampments. As the process of resolving each encampment matures, WSP also coordinates with WSDOT and other service providers on strategies to minimize the likelihood of any re-encampment efforts.

Both agencies acknowledge that it's not safe nor humane for individuals to live along state rights of way, for the unsheltered, the neighboring communities and the traveling public. WSP's approach acknowledges a thoughtful partnership while addressing criminality and public safety concerns.

The current method of preventing re-encampments over time includes site-level modification, monitoring and trespass enforcement. These are not sustainable long-term. 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. The current levels of collaboration and focused determination are WSP and WSDOT's best pathways to significant and sustainable resolution.

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 167 Gateway Encampment (Pierce County)

Before



After



SR 509 Encampment (Port of Tacoma)

Before



After



Camp Hope (Spokane)

Before



Currently



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.

HIGHLIGHTS AND CHALLENGES

- 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. This has required WSDOT staff to stop most new cleanup efforts to focus solely on 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 revenue to partners and service providers would help continue this goal on a statewide 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 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 location being cleaned.

DATA

Previous versions of the agency’s reports on WSDOT’s approach to homelessness and progress can be found online at: wsdot.wa.gov/about/accountability/legislative-reports, with the most recent being the May 2024 update.

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 crew and contractor time, equipment and disposal fees and reimbursing WSP for overtime costs to assist with security. The costs reported below are associated with 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.

Appropriation Name	Allocation	Expended FY 2024
City of Seattle*	\$1,025,000	\$920,000
City of Tacoma*	\$1,015,000	\$916,000
City of Fife*	\$1,500,000	\$301,000
City of Spokane*	\$1,000,000	\$344,000
Statewide Public Health	\$9,000,000	\$6,259,000
Total	\$13,540,000	\$8,740,000

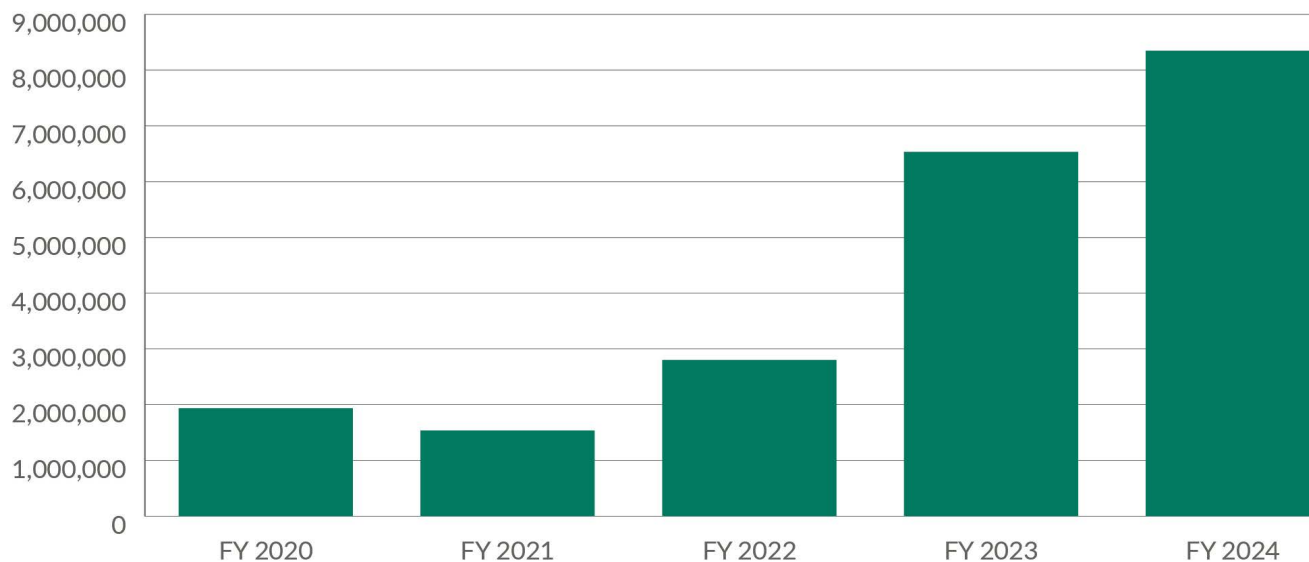
* Separate but similar scope of work

Of the \$9 million “Statewide Public Health” funding listed above, WSDOT has partnered with local governments and/or service providers to address encampments. This work includes outreach and sharing information on available housing options to people living in encampments. That dollar amount also includes site remediation. The agency signs memorandums of understanding with each jurisdiction for the work. Examples of current agreements include:

- Douglas County \$300,000 Agreement
- City of Lacey \$162,000 Agreement
- City of Olympia \$126,000 Agreement
- City of Vancouver \$400,000 Agreement
- City of Wenatchee \$200,000 Agreement

Due to the outstanding obligations for reimbursement under these agreements, as well as the on-going cleanup and restoration work statewide, WSDOT expects to use the remainder of these proviso funds on or before June 30, 2025. The agency does not have another source of funds to cover these costs after that date.

Statewide homeless cleanup expenditures



Cleanup activity recorded statistics on WSDOT right of way

Fiscal Year	Cleanup Activities	Inventoried Encampment Locations	Locations with Hypodermic Needles Present	Locations with Human Waste and/or Biohazards Present	Hostile Encounters with WSDOT Staff During Cleanup
2020	503	350	403	366	19
2021	474	287	314	308	22
2022	515	216	375	339	16
2023	721	313	463	451	22
2024	1076	303	611	629	38

* Number of individual cleanups that have occurred each fiscal year at an inventoried encampment location, some years include multiple cleanups at the same location

Monitoring observations on WSDOT right of way

Fiscal Year	Monitoring Observations	Inventoried Encampment Locations	Occupied at the Time of Observation	Hostile Encounters with WSDOT Staff During Observation
2020	1561	410	401	9
2021	1094	329	318	1
2022	1499	238	556	12
2023	3020	790	937	15
2024	5457	703	1191	36

Cleanup and monitoring statistics combined

Fiscal Year	Hypodermic Needles Present	Human waste and/or biohazards present	Hostile encounters involving WSDOT staff
2020	403	366	37
2021	314	308	26
2022	375	339	30
2023	463	451	43
2024	611	629	91

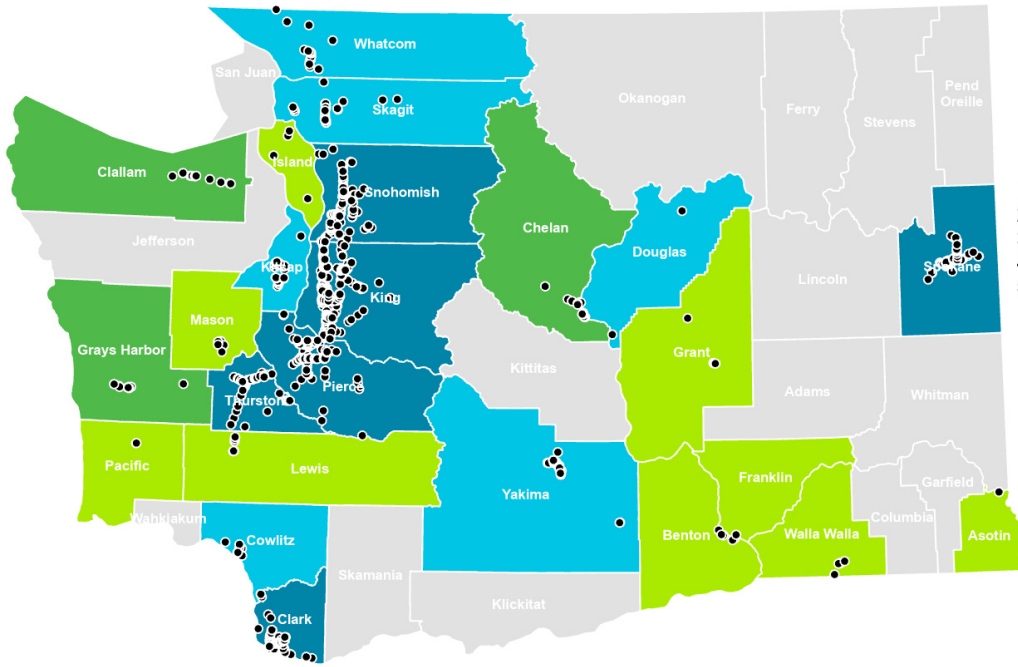
ENCAMPMENT RESOLUTION PROGRAM

The work featured under the Encampment Resolution Program proviso to the Department of Commerce is similar in general approach but also separate from the WSDOT-specific funding provided in the Maintenance Operations Program. The Encampment Resolution Program includes a partnership between Commerce, WSDOT, WSP and many local governments and/or service providers. It also has its own proviso funding provided to Commerce. The work is initially focused on five counties: King, Pierce, Thurston, Snohomish and Spokane. (See graphic “Resolved Encampment Resolution Program Sites” below).

The proviso language requires that housing be identified for everyone living on a site – and offered to them – before an encampment site can be cleared. This is a best practice in other WSDOT sites, but not a requirement. The ERP proviso to Commerce also provides funding for housing and states that the housing offered should be a “meaningful improvement over the individual’s current living situation” and be “well-matched to an individual’s assessed needs.” This requires labor- and time- intensive work by service providers. This approach has been found to be the best chance for long-term success in getting people housed indoors and putting them on a path toward success.

Map of statewide encampment sites on WSDOT property (October 2024)

1,390 acres impacted by encampment sites statewide.



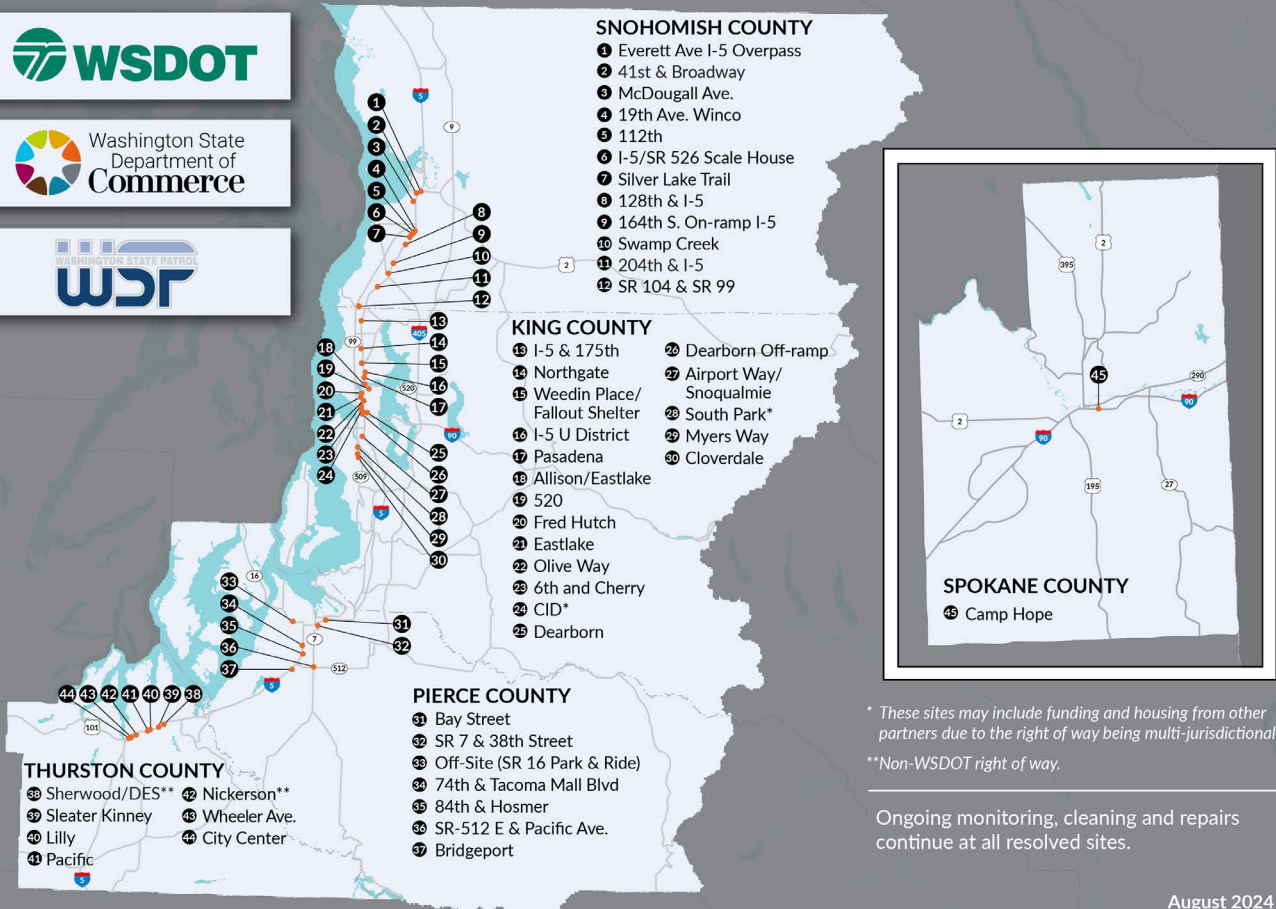
- Top five counties with the most encampment sites:**
1. King (556 sites, 534 acres)
 2. Pierce (316 sites, 426 acres)
 3. Snohomish (270 sites, 148 acres)
 4. Clark (242 sites, 46 acres)
 5. Spokane (162 sites, 17 acres)

Number of homeless encampment sites per county:



* Data reflects encampment sites documented on WSDOT right of way from 2015 to October 2024

Resolved Encampment Resolution Program Sites



* These sites may include funding and housing from other partners due to the right of way being multi-jurisdictional.
 **Non-WSDOT right of way.

Ongoing monitoring, cleaning and repairs continue at all resolved sites.

August 2024

Training services

WSDOT's Office of Equity and Civil Rights pays for job readiness programs offered to residents living in encampments on state right of way within the Encampment Resolution Program. This training does not involve WSDOT proviso funds or the ERP proviso funds to Commerce, but it is done in conjunction with that other work. The program has an 80% graduation rate and has helped people stabilize their lives, find jobs and live in more safe and secure housing. Read more on WSDOT's "[Training for Success](#)" blog.

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. Local groups also have established connections with area providers who can meet those tangible needs on the ground.

Based on this direction, and where very limited available funding still allows, WSDOT will continue to work with partners who are interested in using this humane and sustainable model. Cleanup and monitoring activities are on-going in areas:

- where social services have been provided
- where planned or reactive maintenance work needs to occur
- 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 continue to 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 it 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 – rather than as pass throughs WSDOT must administer – 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.