

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

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# Executive Summary

## Authorizing Statute

**T**his 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 [25-27 Transportation Budget, Section 216 \(4\)](#):

- a. \$5,000,000 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. Of the amounts provided in this subsection, a minimum of \$2,000,000 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 where hazards exist to the traveling public and department employees. The department may use these funds to either reimburse local law enforcement costs or the Washington state patrol if they are providing enhanced safety to department staff during debris cleanup or during efforts to prevent future encampments from forming on highway rights-of-way.
- b. Beginning November 1, 2025, 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 or on Washington State Department of Transportation's rights of way. While we've had some successes stabilizing or clearing some encampment sites on state right of way, 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. 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 funding requirements and costs, along with the \$4 million reduction in funding for the *Public Health Associated with Homeless Encampments on Department Owned Rights of Way* proviso funding for 25-27 biennium, WSDOT will have to cease active cleanup efforts and instead focus on monitoring previously cleared sites to prevent 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. Their work is prioritized by safety-critical tasks. WSDOT Maintenance 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 act 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 state right of way. 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

The Washington State Patrol 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.

## Achievements

WSDOT's focus for this specific funding has been to clean new encampment sites while simultaneously monitoring known sites to prevent their re-establishment, which is a critical part of this effort. Preventing site re-establishment is difficult with limited resources. The same staff doing site monitoring also participate in leading site modifications, partner response, site postings and debris removal.

Keeping individuals off state rights of way will help maintain their connection to the social services designed to support their long-term success. When new individuals attempt to return to a cleared site, they often leave a "footprint" that must be addressed. Crews must once again clean and repair the area, replace damaged fencing, and repost "No Trespassing" signs. WSDOT crews are often the first to notice signs of re-occupation or damage and work closely with law enforcement to help enforce trespass laws and prevent re-establishment. Although repetitive, this proactive approach is more cost-effective than allowing a full encampment to form again. However, ongoing monitoring and repairs remain a continual cost and divert WSDOT and WSP staff from other critical highway maintenance and safety activities.

WSDOT remains committed to addressing the challenges of homelessness on state right of way; however, without additional resources, the department risks losing progress as it becomes

increasingly difficult to keep pace and prevent new encampments from forming.

## Highlights and challenges

The 2023-2025 WSDOT funding proviso, and an additional \$2.2 million of Maintenance program state funds (a combination of Motor Vehicle Account & Move Ahead Washington funds), allowed for site cleanup and some new encampment removal.

For the 2025-2027 biennium, WSDOT's goals have been adjusted to reflect reduced services following a \$4 million decrease in proviso funding for site monitoring and cleanup activities already underway. Current funding levels do not allow for any new site remediation.

WSDOT is working within existing resources to maintain some forward momentum; however, with significantly reduced program funding, less work is being accomplished. As a result, most new cleanup efforts have been suspended so staff can focus on monitoring previously cleared sites and preventing new encampments from forming. This remains an ongoing and resource intensive effort.

During the 2025-2027 biennium, funding for *the Public Health Associated with Homeless Encampments on Department-Owned Rights of Way* proviso was reduced from \$9 million to \$5 million. This reduction requires WSDOT to adjust its approach to addressing encampments located on state rights of way and limits the funding available for agreements with partnering cities and counties. These partnerships have historically provided a stable framework for helping individuals transition from living outdoors on state property to moving toward stable, long-term housing solutions.

In addition to funding reductions, other ongoing challenges include:

- Limited housing availability: Lack of enough safe, stable housing for people living unsheltered on WSDOT right of way remains an issue. Housing availability remains the single largest obstacle in resolving the challenge of homelessness.

- Need for diverse housing options: Successfully relocating large encampments requires a range of housing types that address individual needs related to mental health, domestic violence, security and privacy. Without these options, some residents cannot transition into congregate shelter settings.
- Partnership and enforcement coordination: Strong collaboration with local jurisdictions, law enforcement and behavioral health partners is critical for lasting results. Law enforcement support helps reduce encampment footprints and close sites permanently. Without this coordinated approach, individuals often return to the cleared areas or relocate nearby within hours of cleanup.

## 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](https://wsdot.wa.gov/about/accountability/legislative-reports), with the most recent being the May 2025 update.

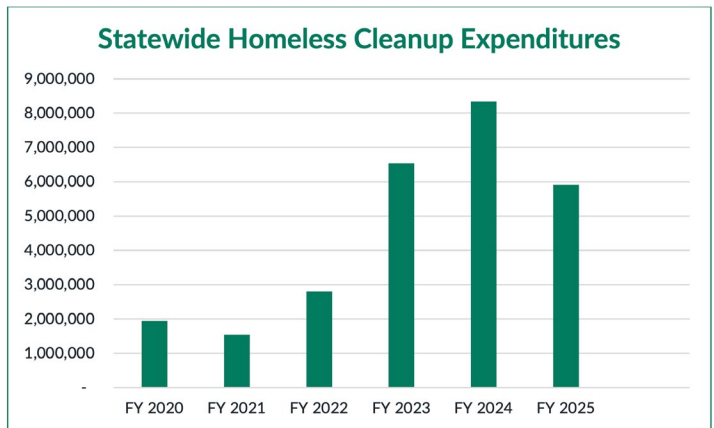
WSDOT’s Maintenance Operations Program was appropriated several separate funding amounts to address encampments on state right of way to improve safety. This funding is for the 2023-2025 biennium. Costs include WSDOT maintenance crew and contractor time, equipment and disposal fees and reimbursing WSP 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 Bien 23-25
City of Seattle*	\$1,025,000	\$1,025,000
City of Tacoma*	\$1,015,000	\$910,000
City of Fife*	\$1,500,000	\$1,019,000
City of Spokane*	\$1,000,000	\$750,000
Statewide Public Health	\$9,000,000	\$9,000,000
030 State funds	\$0	\$2,100,000
MFO Move Ahead Washington	\$0	\$60,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$13,540,000</b>	<b>\$14,864,000</b>

\*Separate proviso but similar scope of work.

Of the \$9 million “Statewide Public Health” funding listed above, WSDOT partnered with local governments and/or service providers to address encampments. This work included outreach and sharing information on available housing options to people living in encampments. The dollar amount also includes site remediation. The agency signs memorandums of understanding with each jurisdiction for the work as funding allows. Examples of agreements during the 23-25 biennium 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



### Cleanup activity recorded statistics on WSDOT right of way

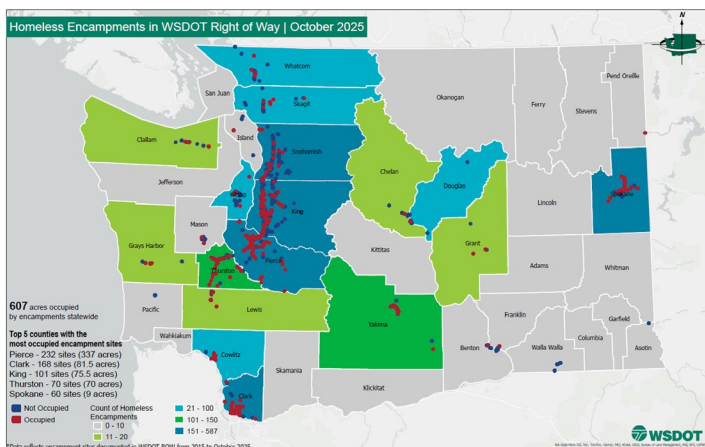
Fiscal Year	Cleanup Activities	Inventoried Encampment Locations	Locations with Hypodermic Needles Present	Locations with Human Waste and/or Biohazards Present	Hostile Encounters with WSDOT Staff During Cleanup
2020	503	350	403	366	19
2021	474	287	314	308	22
2022	515	216	375	339	16
2023	721	313	463	451	22
2024	1076	303	611	629	38
2025	1257	569	889	905	72

\*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
2025	3359	658	577	23





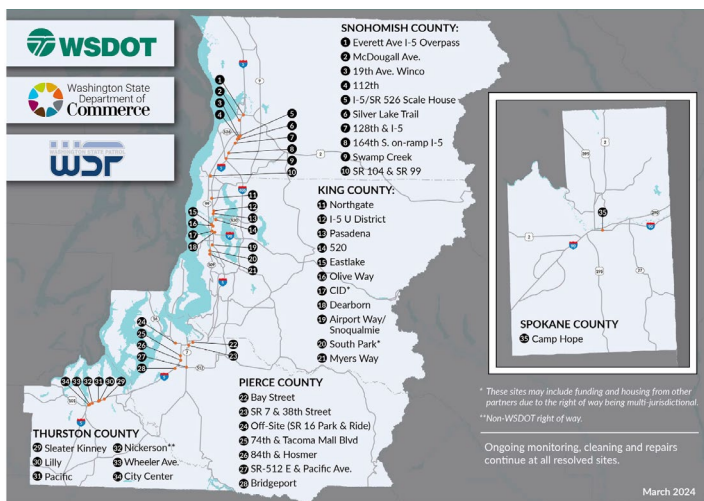
\*A map shows the locations of known and cleared encampment sites across Washington, and is not a point in time count for all known locations or people with needs.

## 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 2024 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.

## Resolved Encampment Resolution Program Sites



\*A map specifically highlighting resolved encampment sites in Thurston, Pierce, King, Snohomish and Spokane Counties shows that the program is working. Ongoing monitoring, cleaning and repairs continue at all resolved sites.

## 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.

As mentioned in attachment “A” of the “**Unfunded Current Service and Delivery Items**” document, Item 4 reads:

### **Encampment Cleanup & Site Restoration - \$10 million**

#### ***Highway Maintenance & Operations – Program M***

The 2025-27 budget bill removed \$4 million in funding dedicated to encampment work. The total funding level of \$5 million will not be sufficient to keep pace with the progress made in coordination with the Encampment Resolution Program. Without adequate funding, there is a high risk that previously cleared sites will be re-encamped, undermining gains made to date. Continued investment is essential to maintain momentum, support long-term solutions and protect public safety and infrastructure.

Providing funding directly to partners – rather than as pass through that 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.