

NEWS

Cincinnati Public Schools' homeless student sleep lot is first in Ohio, says coalition

Grace Tucker and Elizabeth B. Kim Cincinnati Enquirer

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Key Points

So many families are living out of their cars in Cincinnati that one school district is opening a parking lot for them to have a safe place to stay overnight. It may be first in Ohio.

Bethany House, the Cincinnati area's largest family shelter, has been full since 2018, creating more than a month's long wait for some families.

The safe sleep lot will offer 12 parking spots to families living out of their cars and place them on a priority list for a family shelter.

This story was updated to correct the source of some of the funding for the effort.

There are now so many families living out of their cars in Cincinnati that the city's school district is opening a parking lot for them to have a safe place to stay overnight.

Cincinnati Public Schools' safe sleep lot is the first of its kind in the state known to the [Coalition on Homelessness and Housing in Ohio](#).

The lot, which is opening in March at William Howard Taft Elementary School, is meant to help homeless families who spend nights camped out in their cars as they wait for a spot at one of three family emergency shelters in the Cincinnati area.

Often, these families park on a street they used to live on, behind their kids' school or in the lot of a big-box store to spend the night. Their safety during the night could

be at risk, said Peg Dierkers, chief executive officer of Bethany House, the largest of the three local family shelters.

Data from Cincinnati Public Schools shows that the district had 4,326 homeless students in the 2024-25 school year, a **77% jump from a decade prior**. The jump in homeless students, advocates say, represents a swell in local families who have no roof over their heads. Shelters are struggling to keep up.

"We have been full since the summer of 2018," said Dierkers. "Some of the families wait several months to get into a shelter, and during that time, they live on the street."

Back in 2018, said Dierkers, "if there was a family we found living on the streets, we would immediately get them into shelter."

"We can't do that now."

How did we get here? Homeless CPS students nearly double from 2015

At Bethany House, which shelters 43 families at a time at full capacity, staff try their best to preserve a sense of normalcy for the parents and children who live there.

They help parents with tasks that are essential to getting them back into permanent housing, such as applying for jobs, enrolling in Medicaid and reenrolling their kids in school or daycare. Pumpkin carving and trick-or-treating are also on this month's calendar for the shelter's young residents, who range from under a year old to 18.

Often, families who have been through domestic violence or eviction, two drivers of homelessness, need to rebuild their wardrobes as well.

But the biggest driver of homelessness in Cincinnati, according to Dierkers, "is the lack of affordable housing."

"We have a lot more families becoming homeless because of the dramatic rent rate spikes that we've seen since 2021," she said.

According to the [National Low Income Housing Coalition](#), a nonprofit devoted to ending the country's affordable housing crisis, Cincinnati is [short nearly 54,000 units](#) of housing that is affordable and available.

In May, Cincinnati saw a 7% rent increase from the year prior, making it the largest rent jump nationally among 50 metro areas analyzed in [a report](#) published by Redfin.

How will the safe sleep lot work?

The safe sleep lot will offer 12 parking spots to families living out of their vehicles as a way to expedite their move to a family living shelter like Bethany House or YWCA of Greater Cincinnati.

At the lot, families will be provided daily breakfast, hot meals on some evenings, bathroom facilities and safe sleep car kits stocked with blankets, pillows, window covers, flashlights, batteries and more, said Rebeka Beach, manager of Project Connect, the CPS social services hub that's spearheading the initiative.

The kits were an idea Beach gathered during her research trip to three similar secure living lots in San Diego and Long Beach, California, in May. Together with Project Connect's housing specialist, Megan Rahill, Beach saw different lot models, from a bare-bones lot funded by the city of San Diego to a Jewish Family Services site where families reside in Federal Emergency Management Agency, or FEMA, trailers.

The CPS initiative joins a mix of statewide efforts to provide temporary housing to students experiencing homelessness. Earlier this year, a church rectory in [Cleveland Heights was converted](#) into housing for students, namely women and children in the Cleveland Heights-University Heights school district.

Here, Beach said she's confident that 12 spaces will be plenty to meet the need she sees day-to-day in her work for Project Connect.

"On any given night we're only seeing three to four families ... who are experiencing homelessness," she said.

In her research, Beach said, two things stood out to her as being essential to CPS' model: having a clean, secure place for families to use the bathroom and security through the night.

So, the CPS plan includes employing a full-time security guard to monitor the lot during all hours of operation, from 10 p.m. to 7 a.m. seven days a week. Before a school day starts, the guard will be tasked with clearing out the lot to prevent it from blocking students getting into school.

Families' adherence to the hours of operation will be part of a contract they'll sign upon being assigned a space at the lot. The contract will also include a waiver outlining the district's liability for what goes on in the lot.

"If families violate the contract we'd have to have a discussion about whether the lot is a good fit," Beach said.

Families secure a place in the safe sleep lot through a screening process by CPS' Project Connect. Then, within 24 hours of being at the lot, Beach said, their homelessness status will be verified by Greater Cincinnati Behavioral Health Services and they'll be placed on a priority wait list for a spot at a family shelter.

CPS' services can also determine a family's eligibility for emergency hotel stays for four to six nights. But the problem with that method, Beach said, is that once families are residing in a hotel, they can no longer be verified as homeless by Cincinnati Behavioral and can't get on the wait list for shelter.

"Our hope is that it will increase shelter placement rate and families having to return to the lot don't have to stay there for long," Beach said.

Who's paying?

Much of the safe sleep lot is being paid through grants and donations, Beach said.

Her team secured \$89,000 from the City of Cincinnati Human Services Fund that will be put toward the lot's security guard. A chunk of that funding will also go toward buying a mobile bathroom facility.

Another \$50,000 was gathered from Leadership Cincinnati Class 48, a program by the Cincinnati Regional Chamber, for the bathroom facility.

Beach is also working with donors who, so far, have given \$10,000 for miscellaneous materials like the safe sleep car kits. Donated services for building a fence around the entire lot are also being finalized.

A total estimate for how much the lot will cost once it's all said and done is still being calculated, the district said.

Is this a long-term solution?

The district's board of education debated whether the lot is a long-term fix following a presentation Beach gave on the idea at an [Aug. 25 board meeting](#).

It's a step in the right direction, several board members said.

"I think (homelessness) is a challenge that we're going to see a lot of folks around the country dealing with," said board member Brandon Craig. "And I think it's good for us to gather good ideas from places and figure out ways to make it work within our district."

Other members of the board pitched tiny homes or more permanent FEMA trailers as models the district could explore in terms of housing its homeless students.

Beach said that tiny homes or something similar may be an option in the future.

"I would love to be able to provide that versus a car," she added.

Some state leaders say the lot isn't sufficient without state and federal entities doing their part.

"We are glad to see that Cincinnati Public Schools is trying to do something to address the urgent needs of their homeless student population. ... But homeless students and their families need homes," said Marcus Roth, spokesperson for the Coalition on Homelessness and Housing in Ohio.

"No child should have to sleep in a car night after night," Roth said. "School districts are critical partners in the fight against homelessness, but they can't do it alone."