

Appendix N – Supporting people sleeping in vehicles



***Vehicle** refers to a car, van, caravan, recreational vehicle, houseboatⁱ, liveaboard, or other thing used to transport people.*

Jo has been evicted from the property due to an inability to pay rent. Jo was able to store some belongings in a friend’s garage, but everything else is in Jo’s car. Jo has a job but is only getting a couple of shifts each week. It’s enough to pay for about \$20 fuel each week. Jo is sleeping in the car in a different place each night but can’t afford to travel far. On days when Jo works, Jo use the public bathrooms at the local surf club to shower. No one at work knows that Jo is homeless.

Each person has their own unique experience and needs. It is important to understand the intersectionality between a person’s gender, race, sexual identity, culture, experiences and circumstances. Workers may refer to multiple appendices to assist their understanding, engagement and support for each person they engage.

Overview

People living in vehicles are one of the fastest growing cohorts of hidden homelessnessⁱⁱ, however the full extent of people staying in vehicles is unclear.

People may turn to a vehicle as their main accommodation due to factors like high rental prices, lack of suitable properties, domestic and family violence, and/or a lack of knowledge of or access to support services, family, or friends. Alternatively, people may stay in a vehicle in an attempt to remain with family members, partners or companion animals due to limited affordable accommodation options. While sleeping in a vehicle may appear to be a safer alternative to sleeping exposed on the street, people forced into these situations face a range of issues that continue to put them at riskⁱⁱⁱ.

Vehicles are often not able to remain in one location for extended periods of time. To avoid being fined or towed a person may be forced to regularly move or relocate the vehicle. This instability can impede their capacity to find stable accommodation, increase stress and anxiety, and disconnect them from community and/or social networks.

Vehicles are often cramped spaces that do not provide key amenities or full privacy^{iv}. This can also impact a person’s physical and mental health, exacerbating pre-existing conditions and/or creating new medical concerns. Constant disruptions and fear of people passing by, potential abuse, street lights, or being moved can increase stress and trauma.

Maintaining a working vehicle can be costly^v. People experiencing homelessness may experience additional stresses and challenges around maintaining a license, ongoing vehicle registration and insurance, parking/anchoring fees, and other maintenance expenses which is further exacerbated by having limited or no income. This could also impact the person’s ability to move the vehicle, resulting in additional fines or the potential loss of the vehicle which impacts their present accommodation or sense of security.

Despite these negative circumstances, a person experiencing homelessness may view their vehicle as their temporary place of residence or home, and consider that it provides them more autonomy and privacy than is offered in traditional refuges or other support services^{vi}. It is important to respect the person’s living environment and the circumstances that led them to seek refuge in their vehicle, and provide appropriate assistance to address their presenting needs if they request it.

Engagement strategy

Things to consider before engaging:

- Workers should identify any potential risks they can see inside or around the vehicle including (but not limited to) if a person is trapped, the vehicle is damaged, or if there are children in the vehicle. If anyone's safety is at risk at any point, the worker should contact the appropriate service which may include contacting NSW Police, 000 or the Child Protection Helpline.
- Workers should be mindful of the time of day/night when approaching a person in a vehicle. Shining a flashlight or knocking on the window at night or when windows are covered, may result in increased fear, anxiety or a sense of intrusion for the person experiencing homelessness. Therefore, workers should identify the most appropriate method for engagement if there is no initial risk identified.
- Under the NSW Local Government Act, people are able to sleep or live in a vehicle on a street, if parking is permitted on that road^{vii}; marine legislation does not permit a person to live permanently on a houseboat in NSW^{viii}.
- There are limitations to the number of days a person can anchor in one place, and a yearly maximum of days at anchor. For more information see:^{ix} <https://www.nsw.gov.au/driving-boating-and-transport/using-waterways-boating-and-transport-information/waterways-and-designated-areas/houseboats>^x.
- Workers should be familiar with the parking, mooring and anchoring restrictions for the location.
- Local councils are often responsible for street parking enforcement, while NSW Maritime are responsible for vehicles on the water. All workers are encouraged to use discretion when engaging people experiencing homelessness.

- A vehicle may be registered under a person's name other than the person using it to sleep in.
- Women are more likely to experience 'hidden' forms of homelessness including sleeping in vehicles. For more information on supporting women, see **Appendix G**.
- Local specialist homelessness services may be able to assist people experiencing homelessness obtain identification and other required items for maintaining their vehicle.
- Workers should respect that some people may choose to live in their vehicle but not consider themselves to be experiencing homelessness.

Strategies for engagement:

- When approaching a vehicle, make your presence known verbally by politely identifying your name and the department, organisation or service you are from.
- Be aware of any physical hazards before moving closer to the vehicle.
- Approach a vehicle during daylight hours when you can see the person is not sleeping. During evening hours, consider leaving a note or information for the person to contact you directly in their own time instead of disturbing them.
- Provide an opportunity for the person to openly discuss their current state and situation of the vehicle without judgement.
- Provide information on the closest free amenities, including toilets, showers, appropriate parking areas, and where the person may be able to obtain other needed supports.



RESOURCES

CRISIS SUPPORT		
Name	Service	Contact Details
Ask Izzy	A website directory that connects people who are in need with nearby services such as housing, food, health care and legal services in their local area.	Website: https://askizzy.org.au
Link2Home	A statewide telephone service providing information, assessment and referral to specialist homelessness services, temporary accommodation and other appropriate services for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. It is available 24 hours a day 7 days a week every day of the year.	Phone: 1800 152 152 Website: https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/housing/help/ways/are-you-homeless
OTHER SUPPORT		
Name	Service	Contact Details
Local Government Directory	Local councils across NSW represent the interests of their communities and deliver local services and infrastructure.	Website: https://olg.nsw.gov.au/public/local-government-directory
NSW Maritime	Provides boating licence or vessel registration, information about fishing, and staying safe on the water.	Phone: 13 12 36 Website: https://www.nsw.gov.au/driving-boating-and-transport/boating-and-marine
Service NSW	Provides vehicle registration, licenses, parking information, fines, and other vehicle related information.	Phone: 13 77 88 Website: https://www.service.nsw.gov.au/services/driving-and-transport



- i NSW Government, [Houseboats in NSW](#), NSW Government website, n.d.
- ii C Giamarino, E Blumenberg and M Brozen, 'Who Lives in Vehicles and Why? Understanding Vehicular Homelessness in Los Angeles', Housing Policy Debate, 2022, doi: 10.1080/10511482.2022.2117990.
- iii Ibid.
- iv Ibid.
- v Ibid.
- vi J Guynn, [Hidden homeless crisis': After losing jobs and homes, more people are living in cars and RVs and it's getting worse](#), USA Today website, 15 February 2021.
- vii S Mallet, 'Understanding home: a critical review of the literature', *The Sociological Review*, 2004, 52(1): 62-89, doi: 10.1111/j.1467-954X.2004.00442.
- viii NSW Government, [Houseboats in NSW](#).
- ix Ibid.
- x Ibid.