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Monterey Peninsula school board set to approve inaugural safe parking program



Monterey Peninsula Unified School District Superintendent PK Diffenbaugh (Monterey Herald staff photograph).



By **MOLLY GIBBS** | mgibbs@montereyherald.com

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The Monterey Peninsula Unified School District's governing board is set to approve the district's inaugural safe parking program for families experiencing homelessness.

The district's board will vote to approve the contract with nonprofit One Starfish Safe Parking and Supportive Services at Tuesday night's meeting. The city of Seaside approved the permit for the program at the last city council meeting.

Currently, the Monterey County Department of Social Services is operating two Safe Parking programs in partnership with One Starfish – one in Marina and one in Seaside. The city of Marina implemented the \$150,000 Safe Parking program in December 2017 for up to 15 vehicles in a pilot program.

District Superintendent PK Diffenbaugh said the district hopes to start registering families for the program within a few weeks.

"The hope is that we won't need this forever and we will be able to provide access and connections to more stable housing for these families," Diffenbaugh said. "But unfortunately we have a number of families who are currently unhoused and until we are able to provide more affordable housing as a community, I fear that's going to be the norm for the foreseeable future."

The program was initially proposed at a September 2022 board meeting and is designed to allow families to park and sleep in their vehicles on district property.

If approved, the Safe Parking Program will operate in a designated area in the lower parking lot at Monterey Adult School at 1295 La Salle Ave., Seaside.

Diffenbaugh said the district chose the adult school as the site for the program because of its proximity to the Cabrillo Family Resource Center and the families who are in the most need of assistance.

"Seaside has the highest population of our families who are experiencing homelessness," Diffenbaugh said. "It was a natural fit because the individuals who stay there will be able to get support not only from Starfish but also from our resource center."

All program participants will be families within the Monterey Peninsula Unified School District and will enroll through One Starfish prior to parking at the site. Only enrolled and approved attendees will be able to participate in the program, Dikkenbaugh added.

Participants will be able to enter and park in the designated and secured area from 7 p.m. – 7 a.m. The program will operate at no-cost to the district, thanks to a grant awarded to One Starfish. The grant funding will also go toward compensating program personnel, including a security guard, case manager and program director.

Grant funding will also help provide financial assistance to participating families, such as food vouchers, gas vouchers, vehicle repairs, school supplies and rental deposit assistance.

Dikkenbaugh said the district has identified approximately 23 families who are currently unhoused and would benefit from the program. He added that the program is designed to be a temporary solution for families experiencing homelessness.

“If families are sleeping in their cars...this would create a safe environment for them to park and get some sleep,” Dikkenbaugh said. “It will also allow for One Starfish as well as our services to work with those families to try to provide a more stable environment, whether that’s access to shelters or access to other temporary housing solutions.”

One Starfish will also provide bathroom facilities and handwashing stations, as well as trash cans to ensure that the site is maintained and cleaned. The district will also install a privacy screen for the area to ensure privacy for participants.

As part of the agreement, the district, Monterey Adult School and One Starfish will meet at least once a month to discuss any challenges to the program and continue to find solutions to the issue of homelessness.

Dikkenbaugh said the response from the community has been “overwhelmingly positive.” He credited One Starfish’s experience running safe parking programs at a number of sites on the Peninsula.

“It was very well received by educators at the adult school,” Dikkenbaugh said. “Our educators really understand the needs that our families are going through and have a lot of empathy because they (spend) every day with the students that are in our

In October 2022, the district received a two-year, \$500,000 grant from the California Department of Education to tackle student homelessness and provide resources to other districts statewide on how to replicate its program.

Other district partnerships include the Motel 6 program, which provides short-term emergency housing for students and families experiencing homelessness and a partnership that provides first and last month's rent to families to help them afford housing.

The district's Family Resource Center also provides students and families with a variety of resources, including access to clothing and personal hygiene products, as well as information on where they can access food and shelter; collaboration with case management workers, health care providers and counselors to ensure students and their families receive access to basic needs and social-emotional support; helping students apply for financial aid and set personal and professional goals for post-graduation and partnering with local organizations like the Coalition of Homeless Services Providers, homeless coordinators at the Monterey County Office of Education and the National Center for Youth Law.

"This (safe parking program) is really in line with our approach and philosophy," Diffenbaugh said. "So I do anticipate that the board will support it."