



**As abuse
of disabled
parking seems
to skyrocket,
researchers and
cities take an
equal interest in
finding solutions.**



By **Kim Fernandez**

Monitor news about parking and you'll get an alert just about every day that has to do with the abuse of spaces reserved for those using disabled driver permits. It's no wonder: experts say that the dawn of affordable professional-quality home printing and scanning mean it's easier than ever to forge or alter permits. And an economy that continues to struggle makes free on-street parking for disabled drivers a hotter commodity than ever, which means more people are willing to risk penalties on the off-chance they're caught using an invalid permit.

As abuse increases, so too do efforts to combat it. Consider:

- The state of Washington established a work group in July to develop proposals for ways to decrease disabled parking abuse.
- New Jersey, as of August 1, requires individuals to verify their disabled status every three years to keep their parking placards.
- Indiana doubled its fines for those who illegally park in spots saved for the handicapped in early July, putting its minimum fine at \$100.
- Florida began requiring physician-signed certification of disabilities for placard renewal in July 2012.

The list goes on, as do studies, focus groups, and newspaper op-ed pieces arguing for and against stricter disabled parking regulations. Parking industry members and governments aren't the only ones looking at the issue either; academia is taking a keen interest in disabled parking abuse as well.

The Cornell Study

Michael Manville, assistant professor in the department of city and regional planning, Cornell University, says disabled parking abuse first piqued his interest during a visit to California, when he and a research partner were working on a project about performance- and market-based parking pricing.

"We'd both anecdotally seen placards used heavily in both San Francisco and Los Angeles," he says; those were the cities he studied in his parking pricing research. "We knew widespread abuse of those placards could screw up both programs. This was a large segment of the population that didn't have to pay at all."

He and his research partner decided to do a stakeout: they parked on a popular Los Angeles block for a day and watched. (He's currently working on a similar project in San Francisco, but results aren't yet in.)

"We kept track of how long each vehicle stayed and whether people with disabled placards parked for longer periods of time," he says. The answer was a definite yes.

"We can certainly say, at least in L.A., that lots of people are using disabled placards to park. Nothing in our research design lets us determine whether they're using them fraudulently. That said, based on everything you read from different reports, talking to advocates, and the way our own surveyors described what they saw, it seems like there's a lot of fraud."



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What he found was that people did park longer when they used handicapped permits that freed them from paying meters.

"Technically in the eyes of the law, this is not fraud," he says. "And so the question becomes, for a lot of people, why does that guy get free parking? He has a disability and he should have access to disabled spaces, but he's not poor. And the real question is even broader: Why do we think this is an appropriate way to help people with disabilities? Especially because not all people with disabilities drive."

The study, he says, opened his eyes quite a bit. "There are certainly some people who are disabled who are low-income, and this benefits them by saving the money," he says. "I don't take that lightly at all. At the same time, I think there's a better way to help people like that." He points to Michigan, which issues two different kinds of disabled placards: the first grants users access to disabled spaces, and the second allows for a payment exemption for those who physically can't operate meters.

"Ten-thousand people signed up and got those placards [that allow payment exemptions]," he says. "That's one-fiftieth of the placards in circulation."

He's not sure how many of the placards he's seen are fake or altered, but municipal officials in many cities think lots are. And many of those are cracking down on abuse of disabled parking spaces through legislation, higher fines, and sting operations. One—Corpus Christi, Texas—found a rather unique way to reduce such cases. They brought the media onboard.

Inviting the News Along

Marcus Denson took over as parking control operations manager for the Corpus Christi Police Department in September 2010, and was invited to a meeting of the mayor's Committee for Persons with Disabilities shortly after. There, he heard about rampant abuse of the city's disabled parking spaces.

He started tracking cars parked in disabled spaces. "After a month, 40 percent of the ones we saw had no placard, had expired placards, or had altered placards," he says. "And I don't mean the expired ones were expired by a day or two, but by two or three years."

He and his officers went on the offensive, writing 40 or more citations per day for those abusers. "We pounded it," he says. "Weekends, hitting big chain stores and malls, using overtime. It was very successful but we decided that even though we were writing a lot

of citations, that wasn't our objective. The goal was to reduce the abuse so our citizens could find proper parking." And that, he decided, was going to take local reporters' involvement.

"We contacted all the TV stations and the newspaper," he says. "We realized that Tuesdays and Wednesdays are slow news days, and those people are digging for stuff to cover, and we had to get them on those days." He invited them to send reporters and cameras out with enforcement officers on disabled space duty, and they responded.

"As we were citing people and they came out to their cars, the reporters got in their faces with cameras," says Denson. "One station did a three- or four-day documentary about it, going out and asking people why they parked in those spots. It was really powerful and we saw an immediate effect."

Forward Momentum

Once word got out through the news that parking enforcement was after disabled space abusers, the misuse of spots reserved for the disabled dropped dramatically, Denson says.

"The real power of it is that we focused on the objective and not just writing citations," he says. "The objective is to end the problem, and the way to do that is education. You can write citations all day long, but you can't cite your way out of the problem. The press loves it."

At the same time the press ride-alongs went on, Denson and his staff set up a secure website to post photographs of violators' vehicles, license plates, and marked spaces where they parked. Access to the site was offered to city prosecutors.

"Just like that, our conviction rate went way up," says Denson. And after that, he went after those selling fake or altered placards.

"There's a flea market in town," he says. "We had multiple reports of someone there selling altered placards but we could never catch them." Enforcement officers, though, cited seven to eight altered placards per day out on the roads. Unfortunately, the only ticket they could write was for an altered placard, which had a much lesser penalty than that for a counterfeit placard.

Denson drafted legislation to amend the state code and fix that, and took his verbiage back to the Committee for Persons with Disabilities. It became law in September 2011, making the use of an altered placard a Class A misdemeanor with a hefty fine.

"After that, we went out with the press on another sting," he says. "It was on every news station in the area for three days." The result: officers who found seven to eight altered placards per day before that found only two the entire next year.

These days, parking enforcement officers step up their game around the December holidays, and word gets out quickly. The final result, says Denson is that disabled space abuse is way down, and those who actually need the spots can find them. "I went out to train a new officer a few months ago and told him I was going to show him how easy it is to patrol disabled parking," he says. "We went out at 5 p.m., which is when people are stopping by stores and abusing spaces, and we ran for four hours. I wrote one citation."

For their part, the city's residents are thrilled. "What sticks in my mind is that I was at a grocery store one

day that has about 10 disabled spaces," he says. "Four of them were taken by sports cars without disabled placards. I was writing citations and saw an elderly lady pull into a spot half an aisle down. She was a tiny lady using a walker, and she slowly gets up to me, rolls her walker right against me, puts her arms around me, and says, 'Thank you for caring.' I still get emotional about that one. That's why we're doing this."

He's not the only one with that kind of story. "Our guys will be writing a ticket and a car will stop," he says. "Six people will stand there and applaud us as we're writing that citation. That's what my people love the most—every time we're out there, people come up and shake our hands and hug us and tell us they appreciate our efforts. People say they hate parking people, but they're out there helping us like that. It's been a big image shift."



KIM FERNANDEZ is editor of *The Parking Professional*. She can be reached at fernandez@parking.org.

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