

Parking Wars

The disabled and the able-bodied battle over spaces as demand grows

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Kathy Wolff uses a manual wheelchair, and if there's one thing that sticks in her craw, it's people parking illegally in handicapped spaces.

Over the years, she's confronted her share of parking cheaters.



Kathy Wolff is shown leaving work Friday at United Disabilities Services.

"I've had out-and-out battles with them," Wolff said. "One time at Park City, a girl said, 'I park in these all the time and just ignore the tickets.' "

Then there are the able-bodied drivers who think it's OK to use a handicapped spot because they're only going to be a minute, she said. "I've heard that excuse before."

Wolff and others with disabilities, as well as those who transport them, are increasingly frustrated with such motorists. Other pet peeves, they say, include people who squeeze in the loading areas between accessible spots, and businesses that deposit Dumpsters and similar obstacles in handicapped spaces.

And all this is happening while the number of people with disabled plates and placards is growing rapidly, creating even more competition for the limited spots available. One California woman has even started a Web site to report handicapped parking fraud.

- Megan Echterling, a supports coordinator at United Disabilities Services, has her share of handicapped-parking horror stories. Her husband, Todd, relies on a power wheelchair.

In her experience, Echterling said, more and more people without a disabled placard or license plate park in handicapped spaces.

"The problem is getting worse," she said. "And if you say something [to them], they're really rude."

Echterling said she's seen able-bodied drivers use the handicapped spots near the Starbucks at Park City to run in and get coffee.

But that's not the only problem.

Carol Sneath's 29-year-old daughter, Melissa, uses a power wheelchair and their minivan has a handicapped license plate.

"I'm tired of people parking in loading areas" between handicapped spaces, which leaves no room for her daughter to get out, Sneath said.

So they end up parking in a "normal" space, she said, which has its own challenges.

At a Lancaster Barnstormers game last summer, Echterling said she had to park their minivan in an accessible space next to a motorcycle that was in the loading area.



This sign for a handicapped driver on West Vine Street

Because there wasn't adequate room, "Todd hit the Harley getting out," she said.

A premium on spaces

There just aren't enough handicapped parking spots to begin with, Echterling said, and abuse just worsens the situation.

One reason competition for spaces is so strong is that the number of individuals with temporary or permanent disabled placards or disabled motorcycle decals has skyrocketed.

From 2000 to 2007, according to PennDOT, the total in Lancaster County rose from 16,238 to 24,601, a jump of almost 52 percent.

The state increase during that time was nearly 38 percent, from 527,629 to 725,765.

The number of people with disabled license plates, on the other hand, actually dropped in those seven years, from 2,745 to 2,676 in Lancaster County and from 136,704 to 118,828 statewide. Danielle Klinger, a spokeswoman for PennDOT, said she didn't want to speculate on the reasons why this might be the case.

But, she noted in an e-mail, "The one benefit of having a ... placard is that it's connected with the individual, not the vehicle. A placard can move with the person from vehicle to vehicle. The plate, obviously, has to stay on the car it was issued to."

The Americans with Disabilities Act spells out how many handicapped parking spaces must be maintained.

According to the U.S. Department of Justice ADA Web site (www.ada.gov), the numbers range from a minimum of one accessible spot per 25 spaces to 20-plus for a lot with more than 1,000.

An official with the Justice Department said she is unaware of any effort to increase those numbers.

A regular handicapped space is supposed to have a 5-foot-wide loading area next to it. The ADA also states that one in every eight handicapped spaces must be van accessible, with a loading area 8 feet wide.

The Pennsylvania Vehicle Code requires that handicapped spots be marked with a posted sign.

Sneath, a staffing supervisor with United Disabilities Services, agreed with Echterling that the shortage of spaces is a nagging problem.

"I don't go to the mall after October to do Christmas shopping," she said. "I've been known to go home because there's no [handicapped] space.

"Park City has always been bad," Sneath said.

Sgt. Mike Branner of the Lancaster Bureau of Police, which patrols the lot at Park City Center, said 104 of Park City's 6,800 spaces are for handicapped parking, more than what the ADA requires.

But ADA requirements aside, finding accessible parking spots often remains difficult.

Wolff, the project coordinator for the state's Peer Counselors for Evaluation of Durable Medical Equipment program, said even when businesses meet ADA specifications, there often just aren't enough spaces available.

"That really upsets me. I've even parked in fire lanes."

Sometimes, vehicles aren't the issue. "People put their stinking shopping carts in the spaces," said Wolff, who works out of United Disabilities Services.

Drivers who transport people with handicaps annoy her occasionally, too, because they'll take up accessible spots even when the passenger with the disability never gets out of the car, she said.

Not everyone thinks there's a shortage of handicapped spaces.

Amy Schultz and Bob Sherfy, interviewed one weekend while shopping at the East Lampeter Township Wal-Mart, said there seem to be enough accessible spots, although it's sometimes a problem at their church. And that issue is being addressed, they said.

Another Wal-Mart shopper, Alice Hess, said she uses a placard when she transports her mother. Finding a handicapped spot isn't usually difficult, Hess said, and she doesn't notice people parking in them illegally.

Jerry Wright, executive director of the Disability Empowerment Center, which serves Lancaster and Lebanon counties, said the center receives complaints from people with handicapped parking concerns.

Sometimes, it's not the lack of spaces that's the problem but the way they're set up, he said. For example, businesses have been known to stick handicapped spots where drains and other obstacles are, Wright said.

One of his co-workers patronizes a bank which has a Dumpster "that takes up half the accessible space," he said. Even her complaints about the situation have made no difference, Wright said.

A broad range of people with handicaps can apply for placards or license plates (see related story), and sometimes those who legitimately possess them get nasty stares because they don't "look" disabled.

Carol Sneath said she knows individuals who've had that experience.

She's also been on the receiving end. One woman "glared at her" when Sneath exited her van, apparently not realizing that Sneath had a disabled passenger on board. It was as if she were saying, "Do you really belong here?" Sneath recalled. "It was very annoying."

Hess, the Wal-Mart shopper, said people shouldn't judge those with placards. "Health problems are not always visible, like someone with a heart issue."

Enforcement

In addition to Park City, Lancaster police patrol other business lots in the city, such as Costco's, as well as on-street handicapped spaces, Branner said.

Lori Parson, secretary for the Lancaster Traffic Commission, said the number of requests for on-street accessible spaces is no higher than in previous years. In fact, she said, right now there are more removals of handicapped spots than installations because the city is getting updated information on people who have moved.

The fine for illegally parking in a handicapped space is \$200. If an offending vehicle is parked for days in an accessible spot in front of a house and efforts to contact the owner fail, it may be towed.

But that's done only as a last resort.

Jerry Wright, who uses a placard and is in the process of getting a handicapped van, knows all about enforcement.

Wright was once fined \$200 when he parked at the public library because his placard was sitting on the dashboard and not hanging from his rear-view mirror, he said.

Fighting back

In 2007, San Francisco Bay-area resident Maureen Birdsall started a Web site, handicappedfraud.org, to encourage the public to report parking-space abuse.

She was spurred to action after driving her 92-year-old grandfather to a hospital appointment and seeing the last accessible space taken by a woman with a placard who appeared perfectly healthy.

"There has to be some accountability," Birdsall said in a phone interview.

As for the number of placards in circulation, "there are absolutely too many out there," she said.

Birdsall said she knows of physicians who have been pressured by patients to sign off on them.

Donna Dodson couldn't agree more. Interviewed while shopping at the East Lampeter Wal-Mart, she said placards are too easy to acquire, and eligibility for them should be better regulated.

"They hand them out like candy," Dodson said.

Dr. Leon Kraybill, of Geriatric Associates, said the criteria to qualify for a handicapped placard or plate "are reasonably clear," with some room for judgment on the part of the physician.

If a patient asks for a placard or plate, and Kraybill can't justify it using those criteria, "I won't fill out the form," he said.

And every physician he knows follows those guidelines, Kraybill said.

On handicappedfraud.org, the public can anonymously report (citing license plate numbers and other details) not just vehicles parked illegally in handicapped slots, but drivers suspected of displaying placards that aren't their own. The latter "is a form of identity theft," Birdsall said.

Among the thousands of incidents of potential fraud listed on the Web site are a few from Lancaster County.

One, from July 5, 2008, cites an offender on West Main Street in Mount Joy: "Parked in handicapped parking space while shopping at a grocery store, didn't seem to care if anyone else needed it ... so wrote a note and stuck it on the windshield."

Every three months, Birdsall said, the reports are sorted by state and forwarded to their respective department of motor vehicles fraud departments.

In California, "we work directly with the DMV," she said. As a result of that cooperation, the state has taken away hundreds of placards being used illegally, Birdsall said.

A handicapped placard on the black market can bring as much as \$1,500, she said.

Having ID photos on placards would cut down on abuse, Birdsall said, and she'd like to see states take that step.

Staff writer Paula Wolf uses a wheelchair and possesses a handicapped parking placard. Sunday News staff writer Amanda Stoltzfus contributed to this article.