

The **SHAPE** of Disabled



Parking Enforcement

By Bill Smith, APR



An innovative parking enforcement program deputizes volunteers to police parking spaces reserved for the disabled, and they take it very seriously.



Anyone who has a disability or loves someone with a disability has experienced the frustration of not being able to find parking because the designated parking for the disabled is being abused or misused. People with disabilities typically have mobility challenges that make access to disabled parking essential, and abuse of those spaces can cause serious economic and social hardship to the people who rely on them.

The Onondaga County Sheriff's Office in upstate New York operates a creative program designed to address this common problem. The Sheriff's Accessible Parking Enforcement (SHAPE) program was created in 1989 to educate the public about parking for the disabled and how that parking should be used while enhancing enforcement at the same time.



The SHAPE program uses volunteers from the community, some with disabilities and some without, as deputized enforcement officers. After undergoing rigorous background checks, the volunteers receive extensive training; upon completing the training, they are made accessible parking enforcement specialists who have the authority to write tickets for parking violations in disabled spaces and for blocking curb cuts and fire lanes. The program currently has 17 active specialists, each of whom is expected to volunteer at least four hours of time each month.

In the summer of 2016, the SHAPE program was expanded to include security officers from Destiny USA, the local shopping mall. Last year, the mall's enforcement officers began to participate in the SHAPE training, and they can now write parking tickets on mall property when spaces for the disabled are misused or curb cuts and fire lanes are blocked.

The Program

Listening to Program Administrator John Fedkiw share experiences about the program, you realize that the job is seldom boring for him and his team of volunteer deputies, and the days can be filled with the unexpected.

"One day I was writing a ticket on a vehicle parked in a disabled space without a disabled parking placard," says Fedkiw. "I was approached by two very rough-looking individuals that were the epitome of Hell's Angels bikers. I figured that the vehicle belonged to one of them and steeled myself for what was to come. One of the men asked me how often I patrolled this particular parking lot, and I told him as often as I was able. The gentleman gave me a high-five and

told me it was about time that somebody was doing something about these able-bodied people taking these parking spaces from people who needed them."

As important as enforcement is, it's not the only mission of the SHAPE program. According to Fedkiw, the program's primary mission is actually education.

"It's not just the driving public that needs to be educated," says Fedkiw. "Seniors and people with disabilities often don't know their responsibilities as disabled permit users. For instance, many placard users don't know that even permanent permits expire and need to be renewed every few years."

Fedkiw says that rather than give disabled and older drivers tickets for using expired placards, his officers are trained to let the users know that they need to renew their placards. Fedkiw himself often presents at local senior centers and assisted-living residences, explaining how the SHAPE program works and providing information about how often disabled placards must be renewed and how drivers can do so.

Another common problem is family members using placards inappropriately. "A lot of people believe that the disabled placard is registered to the car rather than the person," says Fedkiw. "They assume it's OK to park in disabled parking and use dad's placard when they are driving dad's car. When we see an obviously able-bodied person parked inappropriately we explain the rules to them and get them to move to an appropriate parking space."

ADA Education

In addition to educating users about the rules governing parking for the disabled, Fedkiw and his staff also work closely with local business owners to educate them on their responsibilities as set by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

"Local businesses don't always know what their legal responsibilities are when it comes to disabled parking," says Fedkiw. "Rather than fining businesses for coming up short, we prefer to educate them and help them get up to code as quickly as possible."

Sergeant Jon Seeber, the Onondaga County Sheriff's Office's public information officer and the program's director, agrees that the education mission is essential. "People don't always understand how disabled parking works, and it's our job to educate them," he says. "For instance, many people don't realize that the striped area next to HP van spaces must be kept clear for vans' wheelchair ramps. When drivers park in

these areas, people who use wheelchairs can't get back into their vehicles and are essentially stranded."

Fedkiw offers an example to demonstrate the importance of educating businesses about how disabled parking works—and how education can be more beneficial than writing a ticket: "I received a complaint that a grocery store belonging to a large chain had set up their shopping cart return cages in the access aisles" says Fedkiw. "These aisles have yellow or blue strips painted in spaces between disabled spaces as well as a sign that states "No Parking at Any Time," and they are intended to accommodate vans that are equipped with wheelchair lifts and ramps or just to have room to set up a wheelchair and help a disabled person out of the car into the chair. I went out to investigate the complaint and found the situation was as presented. I located the store's general manager and informed him that his store had a parking code violation. When he saw the violation, he explained to me that he had no idea what the strips between the parking spaces were for. He also told me that he thought that they were doing well for not blocking the parking spaces. He had the cages moved by the next day."

Rather than just writing a ticket and moving on, the deputy—Fedkiw in this case—was able to initiate a change that would provide ongoing benefit to drivers with disabilities. Of course, not all efforts to educate the public go as planned.

The Unexpected

"I, along with two of my special deputies and a cameraman, went to a local shopping area to obtain footage on SHAPE deputies patrolling a parking lot," says Fedkiw. "We came across a vehicle parked in front of a restaurant blocking a curb cut, which of course are illegal to block. Our intent was to get footage of one of the deputies writing a ticket. The ticket would be voided and the driver would receive a warning ticket not to block the curb cut.

"While the deputy was writing the ticket the driver, who was a delivery person for the restaurant, came out, saw what was going on, and went off on the deputies. She wouldn't let my guys get a word in edgewise. The deputies tried to tell her that they were going to void the ticket and that she could park in front of the curb cut or behind it, but not block it. While this was happening, the restaurant manager, who was returning from the parking lot, saw what was going on and jumped right in telling my guys that they had no right

doing what they were doing. She, too, would not listen long enough to find out what was going on. Needless to say due to this barrage, the ticket went through. All these two had to do was listen for one minute."

But for every unpleasant encounter, there seem to be plenty of agreeable—even amusing—ones.


"I once received a call from one of my deputies telling me about a school bus parked in the fire lane in front of a large grocery store," says Fedkiw. "He was asking me what to do and explained that there was no one on the bus, the door was closed, and the driver was nowhere to be seen. I told the deputy to write the

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ticket, and he asked where he should put the ticket for the driver since the windshield was out of reach. I told him to put it in the door, but he called me a little later and told me he wrote the ticket and placed it under the windshield wiper. He wouldn't tell me how he got it up there, but he did state that the people at the store found it very entertaining. My deputy is 5 feet, 5 inches tall."

The Bigger Story

Seeber says the SHAPE program has been extraordinarily successful at both of its missions. The combination of education and enforcement has dramatically reduced misuse of disabled parking spaces across Onondaga County. He also thinks that the SHAPE model could work well in other communities.

"This is a great way for the public to get involved with managing disabled parking spaces," says Seeber. "It's a very effective and cost-effective approach that provides significant benefits to the community, particularly seniors and people with disabilities." 



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