

What to do with homeless college students? Let them sleep in the parking lot, new bill says



By Andrew Sheeler

January 31, 2019 <https://www.sacbee.com/news/politics-government/capitol-alert/article225294450.html>

California's housing crisis has left hundreds of thousands of [community college students either homeless](#) or facing the threat of being homeless.

A new California State Assembly bill offers a potential remedy — letting students sleep in their vehicles in campus parking lots and structures.

Assembly Bill 302, sponsored by Assemblyman Marc Berman, D-Palo Alto, would require the California Community College system to make their college parking system accessible overnight to any enrolled student in good standing. State law already requires that community colleges provide homeless students with access to shower facilities on campus.

"Over the last two years, I've heard from too many students that they don't have stable housing and often end up sleeping in their cars. Unfortunately, this is all too common throughout California, with [one in four community college students](#) experiencing housing insecurity or homelessness," Berman said in a statement Wednesday.

While programs such as the California College Promise help cover tuition, that's not the biggest expense community college students face. Housing takes up 43 percent of a student's budget, [according to a report](#) from the Assembly Speaker's Office of Research and Floor Analysis released last summer.

While federal Pell grants can be used for non-tuition expenses, they "cover less than a third of average non-tuition costs, leaving a sizable gap that these students must fill," that report found.

The California Community College system is the largest, and most diffuse, of all the state higher education systems. It encompasses more than 2.1 million students across 114 campuses around the state.

While there hasn't been a formal statewide survey of community college student homelessness, a number of smaller studies have included community college districts. Two districts — the Los Angeles Community College District and the Peralta Community College District in northern Alameda County — have conducted their own surveys.

The Los Angeles Community College District had nearly a quarter of a million students enrolled in the 2016-17 academic year; nearly one in five students — around 50,000 people — was homeless and more than half were listed as "housing insecure," defined by the [Department of](#)

[Health and Human Services](#) as experiencing “high housing costs in proportion to income, poor housing quality, unstable neighborhoods, overcrowding or homelessness.”

In the Peralta Community College District, that percentage was even higher; 84 percent of enrolled community college students, nearly 42,000 students in total, were experiencing either homelessness or housing insecurity.

The speaker’s report quoted an anonymous, 42-year-old part-time community college student who spoke of her struggle.

“I work really hard to keep up with the rest of my class, because I have lost my place three times due to my inability to pay because of my lack of financial aid,” she said. “I really don’t know what to do to prove I want and deserve this other than continue to show up. And I pray I don’t get killed in the park while I sleep.”

In 2015, K to College sought a \$7.5 million budget allocation to start a new state program providing basic supplies to homeless schoolchildren.

Berman’s office is working with the California Community College Chancellor’s Office and the Community League of California to address concerns such as student safety as they sleep overnight on campus. The bill gives community college governing boards leeway to determine the best way to implement this requirement.

“We are delighted to be working with Assemblymember Berman’s office to fine tune this bill to address local barriers and ultimately provide safer options for students facing housing insecurity,” said Lizette Navarette, vice president of the Community College League of California.

A spokeswoman for the Chancellor Eloy Ortiz Oakley’s office said that the chancellor has not taken a position on the bill.

“Our system is working to help students with basic needs such as food and housing insecurity and also working on a proposal to ensure that more need-based financial aid through the Cal Grant system is available to community college students,” chancellor’s office spokeswoman Christina Jimenez said.

Berman’s office isn’t calling AB 302 a solution to the housing crisis, but the lawmaker argues it’s a good next step to addressing the crisis of student homelessness.

“The long-term solution is to build more housing, but while we work to make that a reality, AB 302 is a step that we can take now to ensure that homeless students have a safe place to sleep at night,” Berman said.

Read more here: <https://www.sacbee.com/news/politics-government/capitol-alert/article225294450.html#storylink=cpy>