

Homeless Residents Got One-Way Tickets Out of Town. Many Returned to the Streets.

As cities offer transportation passes to get homeless people to a more stable destination, some worry whether they are sending people to insecurity in a new place.

By **Mike Baker**

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SEATTLE — The solution is cheap and simple: As cities see their homeless populations grow, many are buying one-way bus tickets to send people to a more promising destination, where family or friends can help get them back on their feet.

San Francisco’s “Homeward Bound” program, started more than a decade ago when Gov. Gavin Newsom of California was the city’s mayor, transports hundreds of people a year. Smaller cities around the country — Myrtle Beach, S.C., and Medford, Ore., among them — have recently committed funding to the idea.

And in Seattle this past week, a member of the King County Council proposed a major investment into the region’s busing efforts, fearing that the city was on the receiving end of homeless busing programs from too many other cities.

But do these transport programs actually help people find stable housing? For many of those offered a bus ticket, they do not.

In San Francisco, city officials checking on people in the month after busing them out of town found that while many had found a place to live, others were unreachable, missing, in jail or had already returned to homelessness. Within a year, the city found that one out of every eight bus ticket recipients had returned and sought services in San Francisco once again.

In Portland, Ore., a city that has spent three years sending hundreds of its homeless residents around the country, the numbers were worse. Officials found that three months after the departures, nearly half of those transported who could be reached had lost their promised housing.

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“That’s a pretty high failure rate,” said Nan Roman, who leads the National Alliance to End Homelessness. “If we were housing people, I don’t think saying 50 percent of them returned to homelessness after a housing intervention would be acceptable.”

Busing programs have been a staple response to homelessness for years, but in the past, Ms. Roman said, some cities seemed to use them as a way to export their troubles.

The newer programs, she said, are designed to provide homeless people a critical path to stability by linking them with familiar support systems. But she said cities may need to do a better job of screening what is realistically waiting at a new destination and to hand travelers off to services near their new homes.

Jeff Kositsky, the head of San Francisco’s Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing, said he considered that city’s program a success and would do so even if the city’s outcome numbers were worse. He said it was an effort that cost the city little in comparison to other housing services, it helped many people and it freed up resources to assist others.

Portland began its program in 2016. Not wanting to send a troubled person into a place with no support, organizers put protocols in place. Providers must first call ahead to make sure there is a legitimate housing option. Some clients receive luggage to help retain their possessions. For those who might have difficulty on a long bus trip, a plane ticket is also an option.

The city sent away 383 people in the most recent fiscal year, with the top destinations since the start of the program being Las Vegas (29 people), Seattle (17) and Phoenix (12). Fifty-eight percent of those who could be reached after three months remained housed, but most were unreachable.



Scott Weber cooks dinner for himself and other people on his block experiencing homelessness in Portland.
Amanda Lucier for The New York Times

“It’s not a panacea,” conceded Denis Theriault, a spokesman for Multnomah County’s Joint Office of Homeless Services. But the city is sticking with the program, he said, noting that it is allowing some vulnerable people to go from homelessness to stability.

Seattle has taken a less formal approach to relocation, with no dedicated program for busing.

Seattle offers bus and other transportation help as part of a larger bucket of flexible, one-time financial assistance that can be used in a variety of ways, such as paying parking tickets so someone can regain access to a vehicle, or helping a person with unsightly scars get a wig during the pursuit of a job.

“Our approach is to find the best thing, and that clearly is not always a bus ticket,” said Meg Olberding, a spokeswoman with Seattle’s Human Services Department.

Citing programs in San Francisco and elsewhere, a member of the King County Council, Reagan Dunn, recently proposed a large expansion of the region’s bus-ticket programs, arguing that it has taken on too much of the burden.



San Francisco found that a small number of the thousands of people it has bused out — less than 5 percent — ended up back in the city receiving services. Jim Wilson/The New York Times

“Seattle has become a dead-end street for the nation’s homeless population,” said Mr. Dunn, who has proposed \$1 million for an effort to expand the county’s transportation option.

But surveys in King County, which includes Seattle, show the problem is largely homegrown. Sixteen percent of the city’s homeless population became homeless outside the county, and 5 percent reported being outside of Washington State when they lost their housing.

Some of those who might be potential clients in any expanded program said transport can be helpful — in some cases. Kyle Calitri, 36, who was lying on a red mat outside a shelter in downtown Seattle on Friday afternoon, said he has largely lived on the streets since he was a teenager. More than a decade ago, while living homeless in Tennessee, a church helped him get back to family in Florida with a bus ticket. That was a vital opportunity that gave him some temporary stability, he said, though he has continued to live a transient life in recent years.

With the possibility of new funding, he said, he was going to look into the option to help his wife.

Various nonprofits in the Seattle area have already provided some bus tickets. The Seattle-area United Way funded about 116 trips outside the region last year, said Lauren McGowan, senior director for Ending Homelessness and Poverty at United Way of King County.

But Ms. McGowan said the idea of committing more money to such programs might be counterproductive when there were so many other urgent needs. She said most people the nonprofit works with are from the Seattle area, where their personal and professional networks are centered, and she worries that spending money on bus tickets to advance a narrative of “reunification” may be an excuse to simply encourage homeless people to go away.

In some cases, she said, people have arrived in Seattle on bus passes from other regions without any housing support lined up.

“Just shipping someone out of town to experience homelessness somewhere else is furthering the trauma that person experiences,” she said, “and furthering this crisis that we have all over the country.”

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