


For Full-Time RVers, Sheltering In Place Is Not An Option

As state parks and RV lots close due to the pandemic, many people with mobile homes have nowhere to stay.

By **Jenavieve Hatch**

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Denny Winkowski and his wife, Veronica Ibañes, were still asleep on the morning of March 20 when they heard a knock on the door of their RV in Marfa, Texas. It was a city official, telling them they had to vacate the small RV park where they had decided to stay through the state's shelter-in-place order. The county had just made the decision to close down all RV parks and hotels, and the couple had 72 hours to pack up and leave.

"They abruptly displaced us," Winkowski said. "But we sort of expected it. Understandably, they have to protect their own."

There are only 1,700 residents in Marfa, and officials in the small community didn't want transient residents coming in and out, using its tiny grocery stores and other local businesses. But Denny and Veronica, who have lived full-time in their RV for the last seven years, felt like they'd hit a dead end.

They are just one example of the many full-time RVer families who have had to scramble for a place to settle down somewhat indefinitely as the coronavirus pandemic puts city after city on lockdown across the United States. Those lockdowns have resulted in businesses that aren't considered "essential" being temporarily shuttered — including, in many cases, the state parks where families like Denny and Veronica could set up shop.



Denny Winkowski and Veronica Ibañes by their RV at Carolina Landing RV Resort in Fair Play, South Carolina, on May. The couple, who have lived and worked full time from an RV since 2013, have run into difficulty while attempting to adhere to shelter-in-place protocols.

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Through a support network of other full-time RVers, Winkowski and Ibañes learned of an RV park in Medina Lake, a six-hour drive from Marfa, and headed out right away. They stayed near a lake on the Texas-Mexico border for a night en route.

They were able to settle briefly at the RV park in Medina Lake — only because of the kindness of the park management for letting them extend their stay. Otherwise, they would have been forced out again, sleeping on the side of the road or at a Walmart parking lot without access to a sewage system, electrical hookups, fuel for propane, or dumping sites for water. They are now en route to North Carolina.

“It was dicey,” Winkowski said. “People are being displaced, and then displaced again.”

State and federal parks have been deemed “nonessential” to maintain social distancing and shelter-in-place measures — but the couple says that they, and families like them, aren’t using the parks for a vacation.

“As full-time RVers, our RV is our only home,” said Jean Mathes, who lives on wheels with her husband, Duane, full time.

The two have lived on the road for about five and a half years, Jean said. They were staying at an RV park in Arizona when the coronavirus outbreak hit the U.S., so they decided to cut their time in the Southwest short and

head up to stay near their kids and grandkids in Idaho.



Jean and Duane Mathes with their RV home at the Hi Valley RV Park in Eagle, Idaho. Jean and Duane made it to their reservation at Hi Valley but found many RV parks closed on their way to Idaho from Arizona.

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“Typically, we take our time, maybe a couple weeks, getting from Arizona to Idaho,” Jean said. But they wanted to do their best to be on the road as little as possible and get there as soon as they could.

They attempted to stay in a casino parking lot just north of Las Vegas but were met with blockades. They considered themselves lucky to find a large dirt parking lot on the side of the freeway to sleep instead. They drove


all day the next day, making it to southern Idaho around 6 p.m., where they managed to find an Elks Lodge just before the facility stopped letting people in.

“We were able to stay, but anyone after us would not have been able to make arrangements to do so,” Jean said. “We were informed that they were being shut down that evening, as an ‘essential business only’ order was going into effect.”

We were just looking for a safe place to stay at home and ride out the pandemic, and it seems our needs have been overlooked or forgotten by the authorities.

Jean Mathes, full-time RVer

They’re now safely in Idaho at a private RV park that has remained open to visitors and where they plan on staying at least through the early summer.

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But like the Winkowskis, they’re frustrated that their best attempts to responsibly shelter in place were met with such frustrating obstacles.

“We live a pretty normal life, with the exception of choosing to live and work in a home on wheels,” Jean said. “We are self-contained and can social distance very easily. Like many people, we were just looking for a safe place to stay at home and ride out the pandemic, and it seems our needs have been overlooked or forgotten by the authorities setting the guidelines.”

Many full-time RVers are retirees and particularly susceptible to contracting COVID-19, said Georgianne Austin, communications director for Escapees, an RVer support organization.

Because of this, many RV residents were eager to follow the CDC guidelines and stick to their RVs and RV parks, which are usually secluded from neighboring cities and towns, and certainly have more than six feet of distance from one vehicle to another.

But instead, they’ve been continually punted all over the country.

“They’re being pushed out onto the roads, increasing the likelihood of exposure and exposing others,” said Austin. “It’s a tough situation and terrifying reality.”



Jean and Duane Mathes take a walk through the Hi Valley RV Park in Eagle, Idaho.

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Escapees has had to jump in and help its members find suitable short- and long-term solutions. The organization owns one RV park in New Mexico, where local law enforcement officials approached guests and said that, per their interpretation of the county mandate, it had to be at 25% occupancy. At the time, the park was at 100% percent capacity, with some tenants there for the long-term.

“We were trying to encourage people to stay in place, but [the state official] was trying to get us to kick out 75% of our guests,” Austin said. “We were able to make quick contact with that police department and negotiate with them and find a compromise.”

In the end, the visitors already on site were able to stay, but future reservations had to be canceled. That was great for those visitors — but not for the many who were en route for their long-term stays.

Above all, full-time RVers want to be able to shelter in place for their safety and the safety of everyone else — and that means city and state officials should deem RV parks essential.

“They don’t realize the magnitude of people who live in this alternative lifestyle,” Winkowski said.

“By displacing us, we’re putting people in harm’s way, and we’re in harm’s way.”

CORRECTION: A previous version of this article said law enforcement in New Mexico were acting on a state mandate to clear RVers from state parks. It was a county mandate.