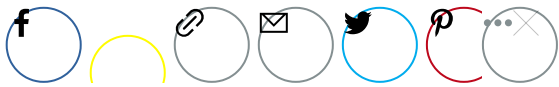


RV parks and campgrounds are being forced to close amid the pandemic, leaving many van-lifers without a place to stay

Sophie-Claire Hoeller Apr 21, 2020, 12:44 PM



An estimated one million Americans live in their RVs full-time. Oleh Slobodeniuk/Getty

Many RV parks in the US are classed as nonessential and have been forced to shut down and evict tenants; meanwhile, those that remain open have social distancing restrictions in place.

An estimated one million Americans live in RVs full-time, and often in such parks.

People living in RVs need a place to dump tanks, stock up on fresh water, and refuel, which is where campgrounds come in.

Not allowing RVers to shelter in place means that many must continue traveling across the country to find a safe place to stay.

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How do you [shelter in place](#) when the places meant to give you shelter are forced to close?

That's a question [van-lifers](#) — people that call their vans, trailers, and RVs home — are asking themselves across the country.

These people usually pride themselves on their nomadic lifestyle, their [tiny homes](#) on wheels, and their freedom. Now, they are stuck. Or worse, getting evicted with no place to go.

As the [coronavirus](#) ravages the country, states are responding by imposing lockdowns and shelter in place orders. Many have closed nonessential businesses.

In many states, nonessential businesses include RV parks and campgrounds



Around 46% of US campgrounds are currently closed. Patrick T. Fallon/Reuters

People with homes on wheels often stay in state parks, but at the time of writing [only five state parks still allowed for camping](#). National park

campgrounds, too, [are closed](#) for the most part. That leaves fee-charging private campgrounds and RV parks.

However, according to Georgianne Austin, communications director at [Escapees RV Club](#), a global RV membership and support organization, more than [46% of US campgrounds are currently closed](#).

Some states [classify campgrounds and RV parks as nonessential](#), forcing them to close down, while other states are imposing strict restrictions on them, making them evict tenants and turn away new guests.

Those that are open, in some cases, can be expensive. [Heather DeSantis, who lives in a 23-foot Airstream with her partner, told Insider](#) that she managed to snag a spot in an Asheville, North Carolina, RV park by booking it for a full month for around \$1,000.

"With all of the state parks being closed and a current travel ban it's been a very interesting journey," she said.

Mike Gast, vice president of communications for [Kampgrounds of America](#)(KOA), which has 525 campgrounds across 49 states, calls the legal restrictions its sites face "patchwork," saying that the rules differ by state, and in some states, they vary between counties.

Gast told Insider that his company's CEO has spent the last two weeks dealing with governors in different states, advocating for why their campgrounds should be allowed to remain open.


"It's very easy to stay self-contained in an RV and stay away from people," he said.

"We can probably isolate better than anybody can, and yet we're not being allowed to isolate," said Duane Mathes, 67, who, along with his wife, has lived in an RV full-time for six years. "What I can't figure out is why they keep hotels open to travelers, but yet they don't keep RV parks open to RVers." While it's true that some hotels remain open, they are doing so with a "barebones staff for first responders, family members visiting loved ones, and truck drivers," [according to Forbes](#).

Jennie Enloes has been living and traveling in an RV for the better part of 10 years, and is currently sheltering in place in a South Padre Island, Texas, RV park with her husband and two youngest sons. She points out that RVs don't share sewage systems or air conditioners, unlike hotels.

"Our units are so self-contained, it's frightening that they're afraid of us," she said, speaking about those who believe RV parks should be closed. "People are desperate for security, desperate for safety, going from door to door being told 'No, my health is more important than yours.'"

A 2018 Washington Post article estimated that over 1 million Americans live in their RVs full-time





Many full-time RVers are of retirement age. Kerensa Durr, Escapees RV Club

According to an Escapees survey of 7,800 people living in RVs, **57% are over 65 years of age**, an age-group at **higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19**.

"These people that don't have homes other than their RV have nowhere to go," Gast said, adding that he's heard reports of RVs clogging up truckers' rest areas because they had no alternatives. That said, those are increasingly also being shuttered, leaving truckers to scramble for places to sleep, eat, and use the restroom, **reports Business Insider's Rachel Premack**.

"It's a dangerous situation when you have sewer tanks that need to be dumped, propane tanks that need to be filled, freshwater tanks that need to be topped off," he said.

"RV parks *are* essential businesses, especially for full-time RVers," said Austin, citing them as safe spots to dump tanks, stock up on fresh water, and refuel.

"We need to provide those necessary services for full-timers, but also for people who are traveling through on their way to a long-term reservation where they're going to hunker down for a while."

She adds that many parks are now only accepting reservations for a month or longer in order to encourage people to shelter in place and limit exposure.

"Taking that approach, we've been able to prove to our local officials that we're not here to support people continuing to travel. We support people who are trying to obey the law and take those precautions," she said.

Most open campsites have also put other precautions in place. They've closed shower houses, bathrooms, and all communal areas, allow for curbside check-in and contactless payment, enforce social distancing in areas like laundromats, and deliver groceries to RVs rather than allow people into their stores. They also only allow for self-contained RVs that have their own bathrooms and water hookups.

As fewer campgrounds remain open, and as many can't operate at full capacity, getting long-term reservations to shelter in place has gotten increasingly difficult



Closing RV parks is forcing RVs to continue traveling across the country.

Edwin Remsburg/VW Pics via Getty Images

This means that sometimes full-time RVers need to travel a few days to get to their long-term reservations to start sheltering in place.

According to Austin, many of these people have faced disdain from locals, who see them as spreading the virus, or who worry that they will overburden the systems, buy up their groceries, fill up their hospitals.

"They drive through towns and people are scowling at them," Austin said.

Enloes echoes the sentiment.

"There are still plenty of stories of locals just not really wanting to understand because they see RVers as vacationers and aren't thinking about the full-time aspect of that lifestyle," she said. "RVers are not trying to come in and hang out at the beach while nobody else is there because they're all staying home; they don't plan on hitting all the tourist spots while you can't. They just want a place to stay like you do."

According to Gast, Kampgrounds of America has seen some success in getting essential status for their campgrounds





RVs need a place to dump tanks, stock up on freshwater, and refuel. Escapees RV Club

"It has fluctuated," he said, on getting nonessential status overturned. "State governments just by and large didn't have a really good feel for what camping is and what the campgrounds provide."

If campgrounds can get permission to stay open, however, that often only applies to long-term residents, not new arrivals.

According to Gast, essential status as a campground means something different in just about every state. Many places prohibit them from accepting new guests, he said, adding that, in some cases, people already on-site with expiring reservations are barred from renewing them and thus evicted. "That's been a constant fight," Gast said.

Some campgrounds say they are being told they can't operate at more than **50% capacity** in order to maintain social distance. Austin recounted a story from a park in New Mexico that she said was forced to evict half of its guests over Easter weekend.

Austin said the park has around 150 parking spots. "So literally putting over 100 people out on the road to find somewhere else to go," she said, adding that they also had to cancel all reservations for anyone planning to come to that site

and that some people received less than 12 hours notice that their bookings were being canceled.

Some RVers with reservations are said to have had them canceled last minute, leaving many of them without a place to stay



RV parks are facing different rules and regulations in different states. Stanislaw Pytel/Reuters

Enloes said she and her family could only stay at the Texas campsite where they are currently based after fighting with the county.

She said that her reservation, which she made over six months ago, was originally canceled, and that she had to fight to get it reinstated. Now, only people with existing, long-term reservations are allowed there. "I'm one of the rare birds who got help from the county," she said. "But that's a rare example, that's not happening everywhere."

"These are people who sold their sticks and bricks and they have no home to return to. It's a demographic of people getting overlooked in this pandemic. Where are they supposed to go? You say just go home. This is their home," she said.

She adds that RVers are also trying to shelter in place because they don't want to further spread germs traveling from state to state while trying to find a place to park and stopping at gas stations and supermarkets.

Campgrounds aren't only for leisure travelers





Campgrounds aren't encouraging recreationally travel right now. [Status Crowes](#)

According to Austin, campgrounds are essential stops for people who live in their vans full-time, nurses and healthcare workers traveling to their next assignment, and people trying to get to their families.

[Andy Shears](#) and [Lezlie Garr](#), for example, say they found themselves evicted from the Texas campsite they were staying at in mid-March, and couldn't find a new spot. After much deliberation, including asking strangers on social media if they could possibly put them up on their land, they found that their best option was to drive 1,900 miles to some family property in Michigan. Even doing 400 miles a day, that's five days of travel — and five nights in which to seek different safe spots that could accommodate them.

"We're not encouraging anyone to recreationally camp right now. It's more about giving people safe places to remain in place," said Gast. "The shelter at home orders ring true for everybody. Where do you go if a campground can't accept you? It really has created almost a new class of homeless people."

"We are an entire segment of citizens who have been forgotten and overlooked. Many of us are currently being evicted from our campsites and forced to travel

with nowhere safe to land. We aren't vacationers, we want somewhere safe to hunker down and wait this out," [Cathie Carr, RVer and President Emeritus of Escapees RV Club](#), told [Escapees](#).

Gast says that campground owners have their hands tied, and often face exorbitant fines.

"There's this misunderstanding, this isn't leisure travel at all. These are folks that are trying to shelter in place in their homes — their homes just happen to have wheels, and they just need a safe place to put them. And that's where campgrounds come in," he said.

"The whole world is suffering right now," Enloes said. "Everybody's in the same boat together, but every single human deserves to shelter in place."