

Home sweet parking lot: Some hospitals welcome RV living for patients, families, and workers

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Jim Weaver has had two major surgeries in the past decade: one to remove cancerous tumors from his bladder and another to clear a blocked artery.

Weaver, 70, knew that after he emerged from surgery, he'd want privacy. But because he and his wife drove more than 150 miles from Bend, Oregon, to Oregon Health & Science University Hospital in Portland, immediately returning home was not an option.

So, the couple brought their Escape 19 camping trailer, a small but comfortable home on wheels, and parked it in one of the [hospital's](#) 17 on-site RV [parking spaces](#).

"Leaving that hospital with the bandage, the scar, and the rest of it, there's no way I wanted to be in a hotel," he said. "Being able to go down and stay in the trailer there, jeez, it was so huge."

Weaver was fortunate. OHSU Hospital, one of two Level I trauma centers in the state, is one of several medical centers in the United States that maintain parking spaces specifically for RVs, electric hookups included. The hospital has offered the free amenity to [patients](#) since 2009.

Medical and RV industry professionals say hospitals that offer RV parking are easing access to [health care](#) for some patients who drive long distances for care, like many rural residents.

Monika Geraci, a spokesperson for the RV Industry Association, said she could understand the appeal to patients who travel with campers. "It's your home away from home on wheels," she said. "You're able to bring all of your creature comforts. It's your bed, it's your sheets, it's your bathroom, it's your kitchen."

Many patients drive eight to 10 hours to receive care at OHSU Hospital, said Brett Dodson, who oversees the facility's parking and transportation services.

"They've seen the rural clinics and they need to come to that next level," he said. "When they do, I think they're more comfortable with an RV than they are trying to find a hotel."

The average stay for a patient in the RV spaces is about seven days, and the limit is 30 days at a time. If a patient depends on the hospital for a recurring treatment like kidney dialysis, they'll stay every few months. Recently, spots were occupied by transplant patients and a family with a baby in the intensive care unit, Dodson said.

The spots help patients keep close to their [medical providers](#) and avoid paying for hotels. If patients don't have access to an RV or would rather stay in a hotel, Dodson's team refers them to the on-site lodging that OHSU runs in partnership with the local chapter of Ronald McDonald House Charities or a nearby hotel that gives patients a discounted rate.

In addition to improving patient comfort, Dodson said, the RV spaces set the hospital up to provide better care. People who previously would have driven through the night to get to Portland for a morning surgery can now arrive the night before, he said. "They can get a good night's sleep, they'd be ready for a surgery, and they're there on time."

Accommodations hospitals offer RV travelers vary widely and many aren't part of an official policy. Among those that do offer overnight RV spaces, not all offer designated spaces or utility hookups like OHSU Hospital.

In Montana, patients have been parking their campers at Bozeman Health Deaconess Regional Medical Center for years. It started

informally, when tourists got hurt while adventuring or sick while passing through the mountain city of 56,000 people. This spring, Bozeman Health created a short-term RV parking program at the hospital, which so far has largely been used by Montana patients traveling for care they couldn't receive closer to home.

Bozeman Health worked for years to turn itself into a medical hub in southwestern Montana, expanding into specialty services such as intensive care for infants and cancer treatment. Simultaneously, hotel prices in the destination town, one of the gateways to Yellowstone National Park, have skyrocketed, and competition to find a place to stay in peak tourist season is high.

"There are towns in Montana that just don't have hospitals," said Kallie Kujawa, the [chief operating officer](#) at Bozeman Health. "We had a couple who came who could not find anywhere to stay in town. This was the only place they could find to stay. And that was critical for them."

Patients can reserve a space for free for up to two weeks. Like at the hospital in Oregon, they need to bring their own water and lug their trash out. Bozeman Health has only two RV spaces; though, Kujawa said, the system could expand if demand increases.

Since it isn't always clear whether a hospital will allow someone to park an RV on its property, publications and forums for RV owners have offered advice on the issue. An article in Family RVing, the Family Motor Coach Association's magazine, encouraged readers to call ahead and ask for permission. The association does not, however, have specific guidelines for its members about RV parking at hospitals, said Robbin Gould, the magazine's editor.

Still, "from what various FMCA members have reported, hospital officials have granted permission for them to park their RVs on hospital

property," she said.

And it isn't always patients who are looking to sort out a hospital's RV parking situation. Staff also have an interest in on-site RV amenities.

In Salida, Colorado, an RV parking lot at Heart of the Rockies Regional Medical Center tends to get more use from [hospital staff](#) than from patients. Both patients and staff can stay at the six-spot, full-hookup lot for free.

One RV there recently was home to a new employee who was house hunting. Two nurses tend to use the lot while they work three straight days of 12-hour shifts, allowing them to avoid a commute over the mountains to their hometowns. A part-time general surgeon from Colorado Springs stays in the lot, too. A nurse comes down every week from Denver, a 2½-hour drive away.

"It's been very popular, to say the least," said the medical center's CEO, Bob Morasko. "I just know that it works. And it helps us staff the hospital."

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