

Wheels of Faith

Salt Lake City Story

The Salt Lake Tribune

**Shopping carts, usually stolen,
are a lifeline for many homeless
campers in winter**



NOTICE

**IT IS UNLAWFUL TO CAMP IN
AN AREA NOT APPROVED
FOR CAMPING**

Under the authority of Utah Code 26A, Salt Lake County Health
Regulation 7.9.4.19 prohibits camping on private or public
property that is not licensed and zoned for overnight camping.

It is hereby notified to remove personal items from this
area by the date and time below and items left will be
considered abandoned and will be disposed of.

Date: 11-2-19 Time: 05:00

By order of Salt Lake County Health Department

For a list of resources for people experiencing homelessness
Salt Lake County, call 211 or visit 211slc.org

SALT LAKE COUNTY
HEALTH DEPARTMENT

A camper is folding up blue plastic tarps behind the downtown Salt Lake City Public Library on a chilly November morning when he realizes Antonio Hernandez — a professional cart “wrangler” — has noticed him.

His face falls.

The man points to the cart’s bare handle, stripped of the plastic cover that would mark it as property of a particular store. Maybe that’ll persuade Hernandez to relent and let him keep the cart he’s stuffed full of blankets and bags.

“No, man,” Hernandez shrugs. “So sorry.”

Hernandez doesn't sound sarcastic or unsympathetic. He's just doing the job laid out for him by his employer and the officials above them. And there are no easy answers for dealing with stolen shopping carts — a mundane problem on its surface but one that can tug on issues of fairness and human dignity in Salt Lake City.

Over his past decade working for [Romac Services](#), Hernandez must've confiscated tens of thousands of carts on behalf of regional retailers. These metal containers on wheels are valuable, costing upward of \$200 each, so stores take a significant financial hit when they're routinely stolen.

But to people experiencing homelessness, the carts act as a kind of life raft — providing storage for the covers and sleeping bags they need in the bitter cold or allowing them to hold onto reminders of a time before they ended up on the streets.

“They don’t want to lose items that tie them to housing, tie them to a better time in their lives,” said Matt Melville, homeless services director for Catholic Community Services of Utah.

Hernandez says the homelessness he's witnessed during his years with Romac saddens him. Still, this day in November, he's been directed to reclaim carts around the city library in conjunction with an official cleanup effort, and he moves forward without hesitation.

Unable to change Hernandez's mind, the camper slumps over and rests his forehead for a moment against the stack of blankets in his cart. Then he starts unloading his belongings onto the grass around him.

Taking a shopping cart from a store is technically retail theft. But Dave Davis, president of the [Utah Food Industry Association](#), said most retailers in the state aren't interested in pressing charges against people without financial means.

“There's the compassionate side of retailers that say, ‘Why in the world would we prosecute a homeless person?’” he said in a recent interview with The Salt Lake Tribune. “We want our property back but, that being said, we don't want to just absolutely put that homeless person in an even more difficult situation.”

‘What are we supposed to do?’

Hernandez estimates he collects about 100 carts on his daily shifts, which start at about 3 a.m. and end around lunchtime or later. On this particular day, metal baskets from Smith’s Food and Drug, WinCo Foods and Walmart line his truck bed and trailer, waiting to return to their stores of origin.

Grocery stores and other retailers contract with companies like Romac, which collects their stolen equipment and returns it, often cleaning and fixing the carts first. Dave Fenton, Romac's owner, says some of the carts are irreparable, cut down for scrap or modified into makeshift barbecue grills.

Wranglers typically charge a per cart fee, Davis said. After they've gone out and retrieved the same cart multiple times, "you start to wonder: 'Is it worth it to continue to pay for this cart to come back?'"

But at the end of the day, he said, "wranglers are far less expensive than replacing a cart."

Romac learns the location of carts from a variety of sources — including from resident complaints to retailers, to Salt Lake City government officials and to its cart hotline.

“Typically what it is is the resident will find a shopping cart in their neighborhood or in their yard and they get frustrated: ‘Why is this thing just sitting out here?’” Davis said.

Hernandez’s phone frequently will ring with a police request for a pickup, such as one recent call asking him to clear away a cluster of carts that someone had ditched outside a west side apartment complex. If he’s not doing that, he’ll spend hours scouring the city looking for abandoned carts.

Both Romac and Salt Lake City police, which Fenton said generally handle the interactions with homeless individuals, say it's their respective policies not to dump shopping carts and take them away from people on the streets.

But in interviews with a half-dozen people experiencing homelessness, several described being instructed — mostly by state troopers — to take their belongings out of the cart or having their possessions emptied onto the ground.

That happened to Alicia St. Clair, who has been homeless for a little over a year and a half, after she was ousted from The Road Home's downtown shelter for a few days. The cart she found didn't have any markings on it, she said, so she didn't think it was a problem.



But a few days later, officers told her she wasn't allowed to have it and asked her to pull her stuff out of the container, she said.

"It feels like, OK, now what?" she said. "If I were to come take someone's house and all their stuff, how do you feel? It feels empty."

Heidi Hegna, who generally camps outside, said her shopping carts were taken twice last year, during pre-dawn sweeps in November and December by state troopers outside the library. The officers dumped the contents of the cart and left her to salvage what she could, she said.

“They leave us standing there. Like, what are we supposed to do then?” Hegna, 48, said. “Especially (since) I’m by myself. I don’t have anybody helping me.”

The loss isn’t so bad during the summer, but she said it’s difficult to bear when the temperatures drop and campers need a basket to carry enough sleeping bags and blankets to survive the frigid nights outdoors.

“They hit us in the winter,” she said. “The worst months they can hit us.”

Lt. Randy Riches of the Utah Highway Patrol said troopers try to show compassion when reclaiming stolen cars, at times using an agency truck to transport a person's belongings to another safe place. But a lot is up to the discretion of the officer involved, and Riches said he expects there are isolated instances where "things could be handled differently."

"We're not trying to make it harder for these people," he said. "We understand they've fallen on tough times and a tough situation."

‘Stolen wheels’

David Rigby, 47, understands the frustrations for retailers when their shopping carts are taken and knows it can cultivate bad relationships between the homeless and other community members.

“We need people to understand [the carts] belong to a business,” he said.

But Rigby has also experienced firsthand the frustration of being forced to empty his belongings from a cart. So the camper decided to get creative, and turned a three-wheeled dog stroller he found in a dumpster into a mobile container, piled high with blankets and his other belongings.

Police haven't bothered him since, he said.

Using stolen carts might increasingly become unattractive to others, too, as retailers explore new methods for keeping the devices from leaving their property in the first place, according to Davis.



Several Utah businesses have installed wheel locking systems, for example, that prevent the cart's movement beyond a certain property line. But those can be expensive to install and can lead to further damage to carts when they're forced beyond the boundaries.

“Oftentimes, when they push through the barrier, they’ll just keep pushing and what it ends up doing is flattening the wheel,” he said. “It just wears the wheel where it’s not turning and then to replace that locking wheel, a typical wheel might be three or four bucks to replace and a locking wheel might be \$40 or \$50 to replace.”

Melville said he's watched people lifting the locked wheel off the ground while pushing the cart down the sidewalk on the remaining three wheels — a testament to their desperation to keep their belongings.

“A lot of the people who are doing this aren't in great physical shape,” he said, “so they're doing it out of necessity. It's really hard on them.”

At the same time, he said, Catholic Community Services doesn't permit shopping carts on its properties, recognizing that they're stolen items. Melville said he calls Romac whenever he spots baskets left outside the Gail Miller Resource Center, the 200-bed shelter that his organization operates on Paramount Avenue.

Some Salt Lake City residents have expressed frustration over the presence of shopping carts in their neighborhoods, viewing them as a way for people experiencing homelessness to transport drugs and stolen property while simultaneously acting as a barrier keeping people on the streets from seeking services.

“If they didn’t have the wheels to transport these things, the stolen wheels, wouldn’t that help curb the problem a little bit?” resident Chris Derbidge wondered at a recent Ballpark Community Council meeting where shopping carts emerged as a major topic of frustration.

The Salt Lake City Police Department, which sees the shopping carts often as evidence of a crime and helps facilitate their return to retailers, expressed similar concerns.

“What ends up happening is people collect a shopping cart full of stuff and that’s their belongings and they don’t want to leave that to go seek services,” said Greg Wilking, a spokesman for the department. “They can’t really take their shopping cart to get a checkup at the doctor and that poses a problem for them.”



Finding a ‘place for your stuff’

Salt Lake City officials try to strike the right balance between respecting the rights of store owners and showing compassion toward individuals experiencing homelessness, said David Litvack, deputy chief of staff in [Mayor Jackie Biskupski’s office](#).

The city has also invested in “[A Place for Your Stuff](#),” a storage center for people [who don’t have a home](#) — and a potential alternative to shopping carts. Individuals experiencing homelessness can keep their belongings at the facility free of charge for as long as they need, said Dillon Hase, a city employee who oversaw the program when it began in 2015.

The Salt Lake Valley's three new homeless resource centers, opened recently in a regional shift to a more holistic service delivery model, also have a significant amount of storage space, Melville said. Unlike at The Road Home's recently closed downtown emergency shelter, the resource centers even offer clients a place to secure their bicycles overnight, according to Hase.

In the program's early days, clients at "A Place for Your Stuff" voiced anxiety about leaving their belongings in 90-gallon bins and walking away, said Hase, who works in the city's housing and community development division.

“When you’re experiencing homelessness, that’s all you have,” he said. “What you have with you. That’s all you have in the world, so rightly there’s a lot of apprehension about placing that in trust with someone else.”

But over time, clients have gotten comfortable using the facility a couple of blocks south of the old emergency shelter, which stopped providing services on Thursday as part of the transition to the new resource centers.

Hase said the storage program, now operated by a city contractor called Advantage Services, was designed to address a need in the homeless community and wasn't a direct response to the proliferation of abandoned shopping carts. But he hopes the storage center does give people an option besides resorting to stolen carts.

Even setting aside those alternatives, some people experiencing homelessness, like Stephanie Arnold, are determined to avoid carts altogether because they don't want police or other agencies to have any excuse to bother them.

“It really is retail theft,” she said. “That’s not ours, you know?”

But her husband recently acquired one — Arnold, 50, said she refused to even push it — and eventually Romac and police showed up, instructing her and her husband, Scott, to empty the cart.

They weren’t without a shopping cart for long, though.

“Right after they pulled away,” she said with a grin, “somebody brought us one. They are everywhere.”

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