

# Houston Chronicle

## Area Police Officers Enforce Law on Parking for Disabled



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Ann West has learned to keep her cool when she spots cars parked illegally in spaces reserved for those with disabilities. Unfortunately, she said, it's not a rare occurrence for her. "We decided it's easier to smile and let it go and let police officers do as much as they can to stop it," said West, a Deer Park resident with two sons who use wheelchairs.

The state of Texas awards placards or license plates by application to those who demonstrate a need to use handicapped parking spaces. Those who park in such spaces without displaying one of those two items are violating the law, even if they or a passenger have a disability, La Porte Police Sgt. John Krueger said. "Additionally, if neither the driver nor any passenger has a disability, yet they display an appropriate plate or placard, they can be fined just as well," Krueger said. Parking with an expired handicapped plate or placard is a violation, too, he said, as is parking a vehicle that blocks access to parking spaces, access aisles or ramps for those with disabilities.

Fines vary by municipality. "The city of La Porte's municipal fine and court cost total for any handicapped-zone parking violation is \$300," Krueger said. From what he has seen, these kinds of violations are not common in La Porte, Krueger said. "Nevertheless, it is an appalling practice, and our officers are quick to take action should they witness such an event," he said.

### **More than an inconvenience**

West said her family has one large van that accommodates Brendan, a 15-year-old Deepwater Junior High School student, and Bert, a 20-year-old Deer Park High School student. The family needs large accessible-parking spaces with room for the ramp that Brendan and Bert use to get in and out of the vehicle. One more than one occasion, they've been unable to find those spaces open, sometimes because someone without a

permit or placard grabbed them. In other cases, West strongly suspected the person displaying the placard or license plate borrowed it. "We had a recent experience at a Target store in Pasadena," West said. "We circled and circled the lot. A handicapped spot opened, and we swung around to park there. Then a little teen-age girl parked in the space and walked in the door." When spots aren't available, the family has the option of parking toward the back of the lot in an open area that accommodates their ramp, or leaving. Parking in the open areas far from the building they're visiting doesn't always work, especially if the weather is not cooperating, West said. "The thing about the power chairs, if it's raining, we have to get the ponchos on them. If the motors get wet, they can be damaged," she said. "I'm not trying to sound whiny, but it does make things difficult."

West said she'd like driver's education courses to devote time about the impact of illegally parking in parking spaces designated for those with disabilities. "I think it's an education issue for the teenager and the parents," she said. Rosario Campos has faced similar situations. He said he appreciates the provision of handicapped-designated parking spaces. The 60-year-old Pasadena resident said he just wishes it were easier to find one open when he needs one. "I see very few spaces, and they're usually taken," said Campos, a double-amputee who uses a wheelchair. "One issue that really bugs me is they never differentiate between someone who needs a wheelchair and someone who has a bad knee (when approving the placards or license plates)." Campos, who regularly plays wheelchair sports hosted by Pasadena's parks and recreation department, said he also has to park towards the back of parking lots when the handicapped spaces are not available. That approach is the only way he can give himself enough space to maneuver as he gets in and out of his car and into a wheelchair. "It's very frustrating," he said.

### **Let law enforcement handle any problems**

Krueger said he would encourage people who witness violations to notify the police. "We have absolutely no problem with citizens alerting our department of illegal parking, within designated handicapped spaces or otherwise," he said. But before making a report, Krueger asks people to look at the vehicle in question closely to be sure it is parked illegally. He said to look for handicapped-marked license plates or red or blue handicapped placards. If those aren't visible, check if those leaving or returning to a vehicle parked in a handicapped spot have trouble walking, he said. "In such cases where a person has labored walking or other movements, certain motorists have simply forgotten to post their handicapped placard up on their rearview mirror," Krueger said. "This condition is quite frequent as many drivers do not like the visibility restrictions the placards pose while driving. Drivers remove the placards and forget to replace them while parking. "However, absent of these conditions, La Porte Police encourages the reporting of violators." Krueger added that individuals should not attempt to confront suspected violators. "An accused person may become combative or simply have a condition which is not apparent, like a heart or lung condition," he said. "However, if a person believes with near-certainty that a person utilizing a handicapped parking space has no ailment, they can either call the police or inform a representative or manager inside of the nearest establishment," he said. "Notifying a facility employee or manager is the more appropriate scenario if there is a moderate level of doubt in anyone's mind."

State law also allows communities to designate volunteers to monitor and enforce handicapped parking violations, Krueger said. "Our agency has already initiated the process of creating such a program, complete with vehicle outfitting, identifiable safety gear and proper training for those who will conduct the enforcement activities," he said. Fortunately, Krueger said, the city has "an excellent group of police volunteers already on staff," from its La Porte Citizen Police Academy. For more information about the citizen's academy, visit [www.ci.la-porte.tx.us/gov/police/](http://www.ci.la-porte.tx.us/gov/police/).