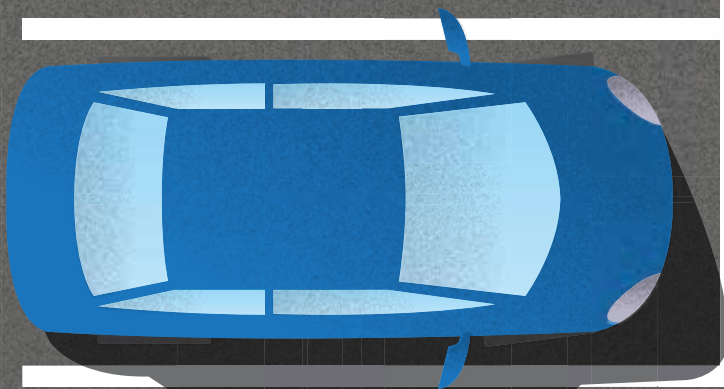
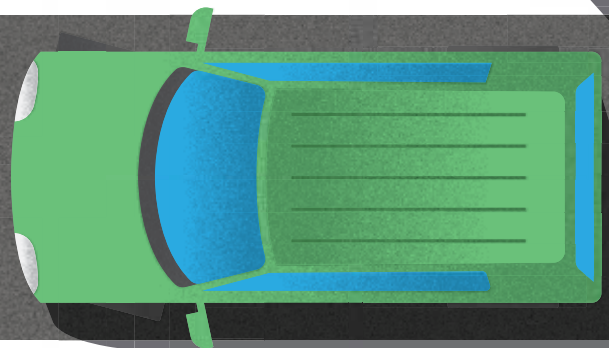


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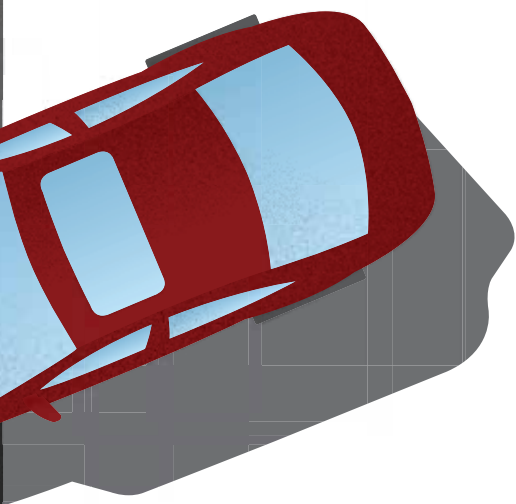


TIER

SOLUTION

**Ending disabled placard  
abuse at parking meters.**

**By Donald Shoup and Fernando Torres-Gil**



Almost everyone can tell an anecdote about disabled placard abuse. One of mine stems from a visit to the California capitol building in Sacramento. After noticing that cars with disabled placards occupied almost all the metered curb spaces surrounding the Capitol, I talked to one of the state troopers guarding a driveway entrance. He watched all the arrivals and departures at the nearby metered spaces every day. When I asked the trooper to estimate how many of the placards he thought were being used illegally, he responded, “All of them.”

Newspapers often report placard abuse, such as the scandal that occurred when 22 UCLA football players were found using disabled placards to park on campus; the athletes got their placards by forging doctors' signatures for such conditions as asthma and palsy. UCLA seems unusual only in the large number of athletes who were caught misusing disabled placards, because similar scandals have erupted on other campuses. Placard abuse is common enough to have its own website: [handicappedfraud.org](http://handicappedfraud.org).

Making curb parking accessible to people with disabilities is an essential goal, but treating disabled placards as free parking passes has encouraged widespread abuse by able-bodied drivers who simply want to park wherever they want, whenever they want, without paying anything. Because of the widespread abuse, disabled placards do not guarantee a physical disability. Instead, they often signal a desire to park free and a willingness to cheat the system.

### Widespread Abuse

Frequent and flagrant disabled placard abuse makes it harder for drivers with serious mobility impairment to find convenient parking. If all the curb spaces near their destinations are occupied by placard abusers, drivers with severely impaired mobility must park farther away or even abandon their trips. Reducing placard abuse will therefore increase accessibility for drivers with serious disabilities. The goal should be to give convenient access to mobility-impaired drivers, not to subsidize every car with a disabled placard.

State governments encourage placard abuse by mandating that any driver with a disabled placard may park free for an unlimited time at any municipal on-street meter. Drivers in Los Angeles and San Francisco can save up to \$40 a day by using a disabled placard at a

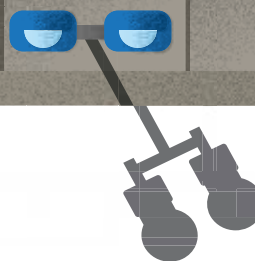
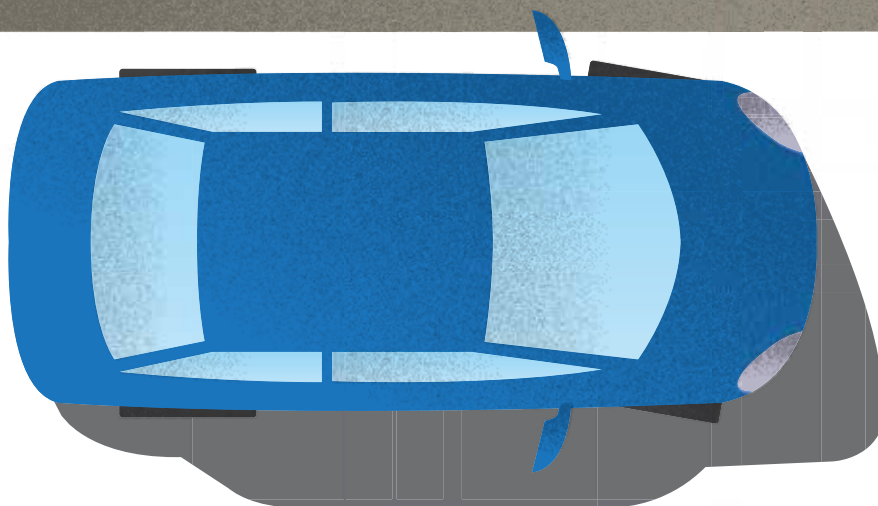
parking meter. The high cash value of a placard and its ease of abuse help explain why 2.1 million people in California have disabled placards.

Placard abusers not only harm the disabled community but also damage businesses and kill jobs. A UCLA study in downtown Los Angeles found that cars with disabled placards park an average of seven times longer than other cars. One placard abuser thus takes up a space that would otherwise be used by seven paying parkers. By reducing turnover, placard abusers thus steal parking spaces from customers of nearby businesses.

Placard abusers also steal public revenue. The UCLA study found that 44 percent of the cars parked at meters in downtown Los Angeles displayed disabled placards. Meters on one block charged \$4 an hour but earned only \$.28 an hour because cars with placards occupied most of the spaces for most of the day. Several drivers with disabled placards were observed carrying heavy loads between their cars and the adjacent businesses. The meter exemption is an invitation to obtain and abuse placards for personal gain.

**If all Americans knew the extent of this uncontrolled abuse, most would be outraged and the rest might try to get their hands on a placard if they don't already have one. Placard abusers learn to live without their scruples, but not without their cars.**





Because California requires free parking at meters for placard users without compensating cities for the lost revenue, the meter exemption is an unfunded mandate. How big is this unfunded mandate? If, for example, cities lose meter revenue of only \$100 a year per placard, the total state-wide loss is \$210 million each year lost to placards. Little of that subsidy benefits drivers with seriously impaired mobility. An audit in San Francisco found that the city lost \$22.7 million in 2013 because cars with disabled placards accounted for 20 percent of all the occupied time at on-street meters.

Equal access under the Americans with Disabilities Act should mean convenient parking for every person with a fundamental disability, not free parking for every car with a disabled placard. Because of widespread abuse, we cannot assume every driver with a placard has a serious physical disability that impairs mobility.

Placard abuse is not a victimless crime. If all Americans knew the extent of this uncontrolled abuse, most would be outraged and the rest might try to get their hands on a placard if they don't already have one. Placard abusers learn to live without their scruples, but not without their cars.

Requiring all placard holders to pay at meters would eliminate the financial incentive for fraud. Nevertheless, some drivers have disabilities that severely limit mobility, and free parking at meters greatly increases their access. Rather than require all placard holders to pay at meters, states can adopt a two-tier reform that allows free parking at meters for everyone with a disability that seriously limits their mobility.

## The Two-Tier Solution

Michigan and Illinois have adopted a two-tier system that takes into account different levels of disability. Drivers with disabilities that seriously limit mobility continue to park free at meters. Drivers with less serious disabilities must pay at meters. Enforcement is simple: able-bodied drivers who use the special serious-disability placard that allows free parking at meters are obviously breaking the law as soon as they hop out of a car and stride away.

Giving free parking only to drivers who have serious physical disabilities can eliminate the scourge of placard abuse and thus ensure convenient parking for truly disabled drivers. This new policy can be based on the models in Michigan and Illinois.

To explain the two-tier reform, here is the key provision in the Illinois law:

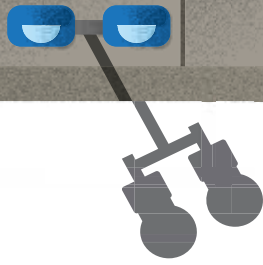
The Secretary of State . . . shall issue a meter-exempt decal or device to a person with disabilities who . . . is unable to . . . approach a parking meter due to his or her use of a wheelchair or other device for mobility or walk more than 20 feet due to an orthopedic, neurological, cardiovascular, or lung condition in which the degree of debilitation is so severe that it almost completely impedes the ability to walk.

In addition to exempting drivers with impaired mobility, the Illinois law also exempts persons who can walk but are unable to operate a parking meter. Many of those who cannot operate a parking meter, however, are chauffeured by someone who can operate a parking meter. To accommodate the few who do drive but cannot operate a parking meter, cities can waive the usual transaction surcharges for paying by cell phones or other in-vehicle devices.

States can also mandate additional measures to ensure that convenient meter spaces are available to drivers with limited mobility. For example, the state can require cities to dedicate a specific share of convenient curb spaces only for cars with a limited-mobility disabled placard, and these spaces would not need meters.

When Illinois adopted the two-tier reform, Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel said, "This law is about preserving free on-street parking for motorists with disabilities that prevent them from being able to pay a meter." The Commissioner of the Mayor's Office for People with

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Disabilities said, “The availability of accessible parking has long been an issue that needed to be addressed on behalf of the disability community. The high level of abuse prevents people with disabilities from carrying out day-to-day activities and also limits their full participation in the community.”

The two-tier reform will greatly reduce the financial incentives to cheat and will improve life for everyone except drivers who now abuse disabled placards. If a state does remove its mandate for free parking at meters for all cars with placards, however, any city can continue to offer free parking at its own meters for all cars with placards.

### Using the New Revenue

The two-tier reform will reduce placard abuse and increase accessibility for drivers with impaired mobility, but it will also require meter payments from legitimate placard holders with less severe disabilities. Although the goal of reform is to curb placard abuse, the increased meter payments can give the impression that cities want reform mainly because they want the meter revenue. To encourage the disabled community to support the two-tier reform, states can require cities to dedicate the new meter revenue to pay for services that can benefit people with disabilities, such as safer sidewalks, curb ramps, and audible devices at pedestrian crosswalks to assist the visually impaired across intersections.

Because California has issued 2.1 million disabled placards for its 24 million licensed drivers, about 9 percent of all drivers have placards. To improve life for the disabled community after placard reform, the state could require cities to dedicate 10 percent of their total meter revenue to increase mobility services for

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all people with disabilities. In 2012, cities and counties reported \$410 million in parking revenues. A 10 percent dedication for placard reform could therefore provide about \$41 million a year for disabled mobility services.

Much of the new meter revenue will come not from drivers with disabilities but from the profligate and unmonitored parking subsidies now being stolen by placard abusers. A study in Alexandria, Virginia, illustrates how placard reform can greatly benefit the entire disabled community. Police officers who interviewed drivers returning to cars displaying disabled placards found that 90 percent of the placards checked were being used illegally. These placard abusers therefore stole 90 percent of the meter subsidy intended for people with disabilities. Spending the full meter subsidy to provide public services that benefit all people with disabilities seems much fairer and more efficient than wasting 90 percent of the subsidy to provide free parking for placard abusers.

### Reduced Placard Abuse and Increased Disabled Accessibility

Beyond improving access for drivers with severe disabilities and providing funds to finance new mobility services, the two-tier solution will counter the culture of corruption that has developed around disabled parking placards. States encourage this licensed fraud by making placard abuse easy, profitable, and rarely punished. Because enforcement is so difficult and the chance of getting a ticket is so low, even high fines do not prevent abuse.

This simple two-tier solution will reduce placard abuse, increase accessibility for drivers with severe disabilities, and finance added services for all people with disabilities.

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## Videos

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NBC Investigation of Disabled Placard Abuse  
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*You have taken  
my*



**PARKING**  
*space!*

*Would you like my  
disability also?*