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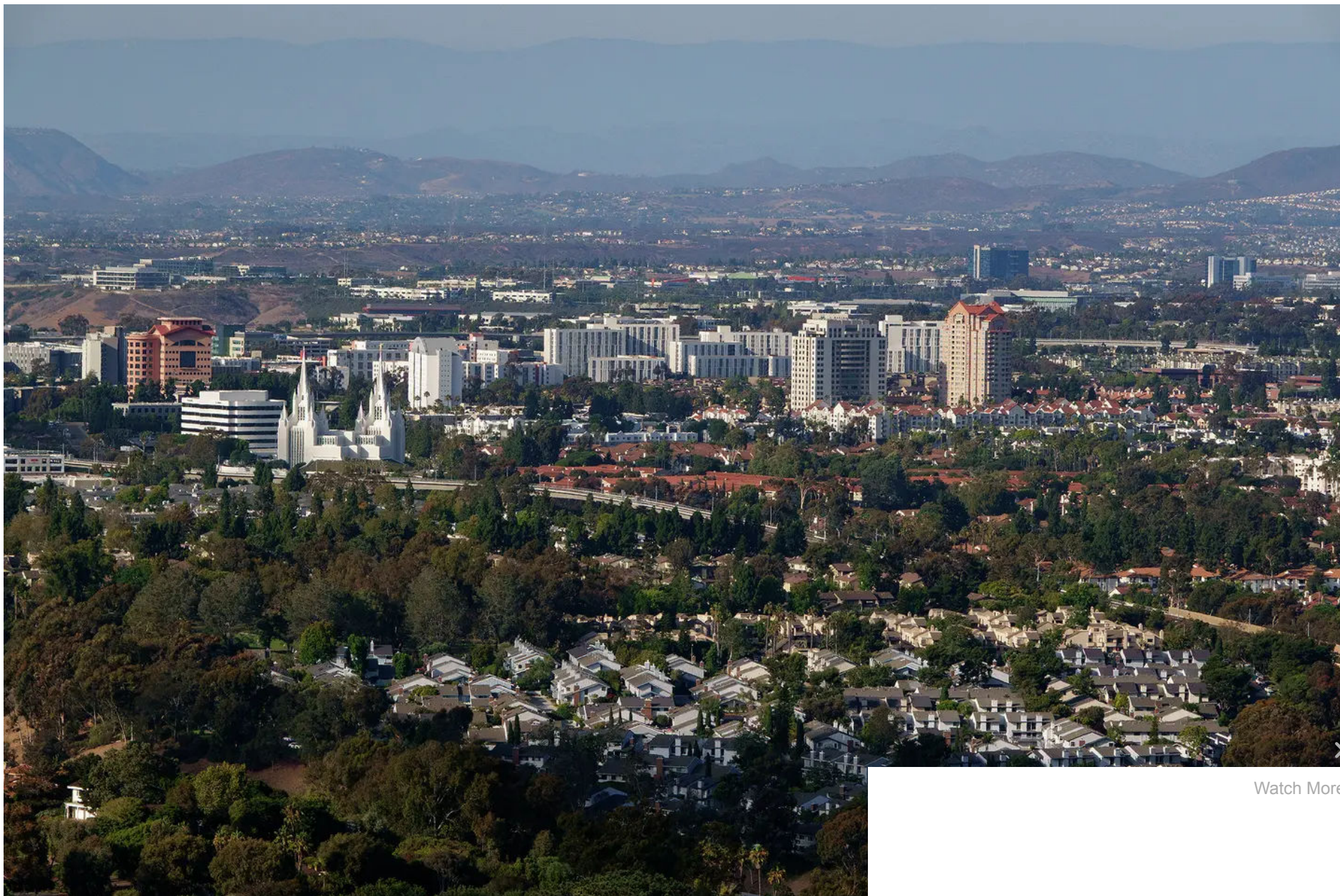
Calif.'s newest homelessness s college kids sleep in tl

Opponents question if the plan is enough — c



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FILE: UCSD told SFGATE 149 students utilized the school's emergency housing resource more could be sleeping in their cars in the neighborhoods surrounding the university
Kevin Carter/Getty Images

By **Summer Maxwell**, *Editorial Intern*

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Sep 4, 2025



Listen Now: Calif.'s newest homelessness solution is letting college kids

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In the fall of 2021, Emma Johnson was ready to move into her new apartment and begin her senior year at UC San Diego. The school guarantees campus dorms for students' first two years, but most juniors and seniors live off campus.



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One by one, Johnson's roommates found friends to crash with or leased new apartments with their parents as cosigners. But Johnson, who paid for school and her living expenses with a Pell Grant — federal funding granted to students with exceptional financial need that does not need to be repaid — and federal loans, suddenly found herself homeless. Her loans provided enough money to pay rent, but without a steady flow of income, Johnson received rejection after rejection on her apartment applications. That's when she moved into her car for two months, spending the night camped in parking lots of retail stores or public parks around the university's campus.

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"I wasn't able to get an apartment because the landlords in San Diego weren't impressed with my rental application, which I don't blame them," Johnson said. "I had basically no rental history and no cosigner."



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Emma Johnson graduated from UCSD in 2022.
Courtesy of Emma Johnson

Thousands of students enrolled in California's public colleges and u
every year, even at prestigious universities like UCSD. According to

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California's community college students reported being homeless, as did 11% of those enrolled at a California State University campus and 8% of those in the University of California system.

By next Friday, the state Legislature will decide the fate of a bill, introduced by Assemblymember Corey Jackson, designed to be part of the solution to the high number of homeless students in higher education: Assembly Bill 90. The bill would require the state's 72 community college districts to propose and vote on a plan to allow homeless students to spend the night in their cars in campus parking lots, often known as safe parking programs.

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On Friday the state Senate Appropriations Committee moved to hold the bill under submission: a stealthy killer for bills used to shelve legislation without much public debate. AB 90 now faces an uphill battle — unlikely to be victorious — to pass the Legislature before next week's deadline.

The bill's current iteration has already been watered down since Jackson introduced it in January, as the original version required the state's community colleges and the California State University system to adopt safe parking programs, rather than just consider them at community colleges only. But the bill's opponents still argue the legislation may hinder more comprehensive aid programs and put too high a financial burden on schools.

"The legislation is a half measure when we need a full measure," said Elliot Stern, the president of Saddleback College, a community college in Orange County. Stern estimates 20 to 30 homeless students are enrolled at Saddleback, and thousands may be in imminent danger of losing their housing by being behind on rent payments or threatened with eviction.



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FILE: Saddleback College plans to break ground on a student housing development to save the funds.

MediaNews Group/Getty Images

Supporters say the bill could provide a safe haven for students who are without a place to sleep, like Johnson.

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“There’s sort of an idea throughout the society at large that homelessness is the outcome of a long series of mistakes and errors that people have made,” said Tracy R
nonprofit in favor of AB 90. “But in many cases, it’s simply that reso
one thing goes wrong, things can kind of spiral out of control.”

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As the first day of the semester approached in 2021, Johnson’s spir
unsuccessfully applied for apartments, and she told UCSD she had **SFGATE**

provided her with a 30-day stay in campus emergency housing, but her apartment hunt continued to flounder.

"If you are a new renter and don't have rental history and you don't have a cosigner, it is virtually impossible," Johnson said. "It was basically a failed mission to apply to apartments. I was not getting accepted for anything at my price range."

After her month was up, Johnson asked the school for a 30-day extension. Then another.

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“Eventually, they told me, ‘We’ve given you quite a lot of courtesy. I’m sorry that you haven’t found a permanent solution,’” she said. “‘Your emergency housing stay is over.’”

That’s when Johnson moved her life into her car — where she remained changed everything.

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"Small things that we do every day that we don't even think about doing, they become such huge obstacles when your main landing zone is your vehicle," she said.

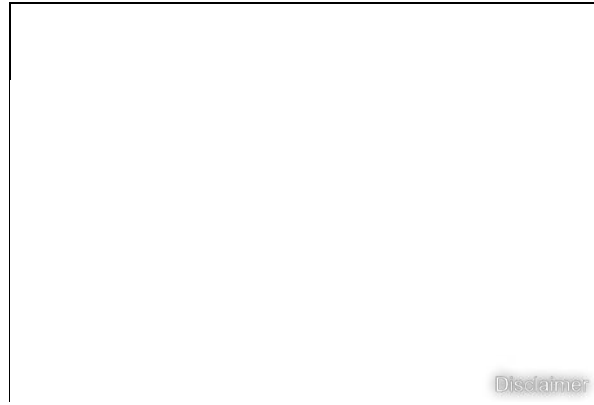
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Instantly, Johnson was confronted by a new slew of challenges, in addition to the normal struggles of college life. Where would she shower? Brush her teeth? Access the internet to do her homework?

She quickly developed a routine: drive to campus early in the morning to get parking permits, which she did not have. Then shower and get ready. Then she could find parking, usually over a mile away, and walk back to class.

At night, Johnson would park in surrounding neighborhoods to sleep. She would sleep in churches and grocery stores. Sometimes she'd park at a lookout point. **SFGATE**

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sleeping out of cars or recreational vehicles but often felt unsafe there.



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FILE: At some schools, like Cal Poly Humboldt, students resorted to living in reaction to remove the RVs from campus parking lots in 2023.

Allen J. Schaben/Los Angeles Times/Getty Images

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"Nobody ever bothered me. But when you hear people outside of your car, it is really unsettling," she said. "... I don't think anyone had any intentions of hurting me, but that thought is always in the back of your head."

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The nightly search for a parking spot and the fear of harm is what proponents of AB 90 say the bill will alleviate for homeless students.

"This is not the final solution. No one is advocating for us leaving students in their car," said Jataun Stevens, a senior attorney on the education equity team at Public Advocates, a nonprofit law firm that spoke at the statehouse in favor of the bill. Stevens argued for the bill's utility while more student housing is built.

"You have students who are right now sleeping in their car and need a safe place to be while they pursue their education to help them get on a career path that could help them get into permanent housing," Stevens said.

AB 90 is the third effort by legislators to implement safe parking on some of the state's public campuses.

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In 2019, Assemblymember Marc Berman proposed a bill that would have required community colleges to allow homeless students to park on campus free of charge. In 2024, Jackson followed, introducing legislation that would have required community colleges and the CSU system to establish pilot safe parking programs. Both measures failed to pass out of the state Senate.

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FILE: Marc Berman's bill — introduced six years ago — was the first of three efforts to help students find housing. The bill would allow students to sleep in their cars on campus.

Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

Jackson said he knows students living in their cars isn't an ideal solution, but it's a way to help students find housing. However, he argues that while the state brainstorms long-term solutions, it should also provide immediate relief for students in need.

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address the issue with immediate measures.

"Even if we decided to build housing today, it would be at least a year before people can move into that housing," he said. "What's happening with those students? Within that year, we can't pretend like they won't exist."

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According to a 2020 study from UCLA, homelessness negatively impacts college students' GPAs and dropout rates. Students experiencing homelessness also experience more symptoms of anxiety and depression, and higher levels of stress.

"We've heard from students who are sleeping in their cars that one day a police officer come up and bang on their window in the middle of the night."

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then have to wake up at 9 in the morning and go to class,” said Ryan Lenney, the co-chair of the Student HOMES Coalition, a student housing advocacy group. “I mean, to try and imagine the mental toll that that takes on a student is impossible.”

In October 2023, Cal Poly Humboldt evicted students sleeping in their cars and RVs from campus parking lots.

But other schools have already implemented safe parking programs successfully. In 2021, Long Beach City College launched its safe parking program — the first school in California to do so, according to Nohel Corral, the college’s executive vice president of student services. Cuyamaca College followed suit in 2024.

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FILE: If AB 90 passes, Long Beach City College's safe parking program could be a model for other community colleges.

Gary Coronado/Los Angeles Times/Getty Images

Corral said Long Beach City College learned that dozens of its students were sleeping in cars, and then it opened one of its parking structures

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The school paid the initial costs to implement the program through COVID-19 federal funding and now continues it with grants and a donation from the Mackenzie Scott Foundation. Corral estimated the program costs the school \$200,000 each year to run. Over 30 students register for the safe parking program in a typical semester, but only four to six students use it each night.

The school also has plans to build a 422-bed affordable housing facility for students, scheduled to open in fall 2028. In the meantime, Corral says the safe parking program has been a success.

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"It certainly has helped keep our students safe so that they could take on their responsibilities," he said.

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Gerbenn Seraphin moved to California from Florida to study, eventually landir better opportunities. Instead, he was met with the nearly insurmountable costi
Screenshot via Google Street View

AB 90 wouldn't impact the UC and CSU systems. However, it does l
aid students struggling with homelessness at community colleges, **SFGATE**

Seraphin, 20, is studying engineering at Mission College, a community college in Santa Clara, where the average price for a studio apartment teeters just below \$3,000. When Seraphin first arrived at Mission College, he crashed on friends' couches and then stayed at the Bill Wilson Center, which provides services for homeless youth.

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Though the school connected Seraphin with counseling, it did not offer any housing. So Seraphin worked part time in construction to save money for rent, often labc before heading to campus for a full day of classes and studying.



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Eventually, he bought a used car for \$500 and lived in it for three r property of the former owner, just using it to sleep. Though Seraphi

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all the problems of homeless students, it is a step in the right direction. "Sleeping in cars on campus would feel much, much safer than where I was," he said.

Yet the bill continues to face a slew of detractors — and chief among their concerns is cost.

Mark Fields, the vice president of academic affairs at College of the Siskiyous, a community college in the shadow of Mount Shasta, spent two weeks living out of his 1972 Ford Pinto as a young adult himself. Yet he spoke against AB 90 in legislative hearings this summer.

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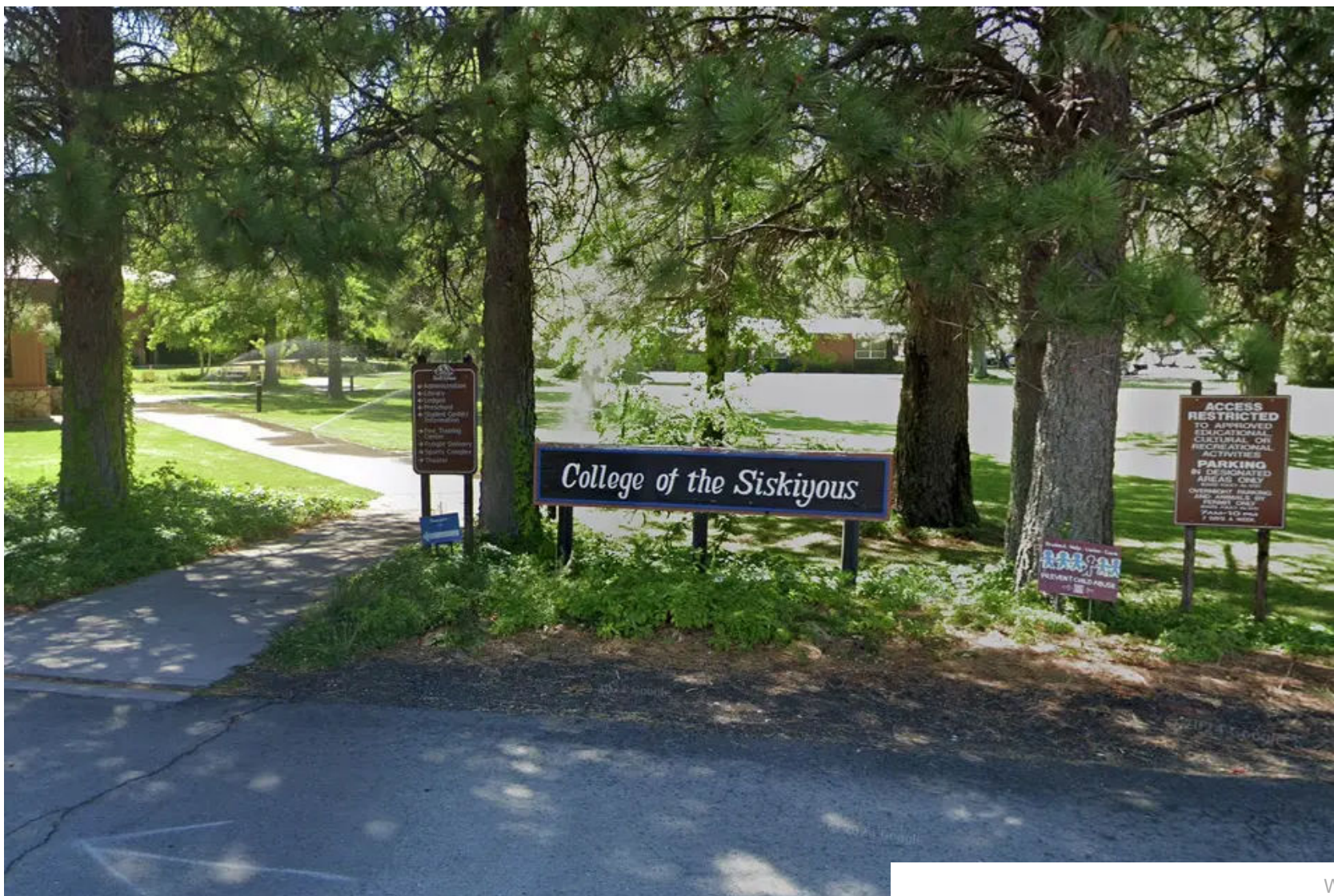
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"It's not decent living in your car. Like I said, I did it," Fields told SFG.

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College of the Siskiyous President Mark Fields spoke in front of the state Legislature where the school is located, has average lows below freezing five months out of the year, and many students are sleeping in cars.

Screenshot via Google Street View

College of the Siskiyous does offer dorm housing, which students can receive through financial aid vouchers or scholarships. The school also plans to break ground on a new dormitory building. **SFGATE**

student beds in the coming months. Fields said there is always a waitlist to get into student housing.

His major sticking point on AB 90 is the cost. Fields says implementing a safe parking program would require hiring security and providing access to restroom facilities.

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"It comes out of our general fund. We don't have the money to do that," he said.



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The state estimates it would cost each community college district |
\$700,000 each year to maintain a safe parking program, or \$40 mi
every district voted to adopt or implement a program.

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Fields also rejects the idea of condoning students sleeping in their cars, especially in the climate of Siskiyou County.

"Up here, it gets cold in the winter. We have times we're waking up to 2 feet of snow," he said. "If you're in your car, there's no getting out."

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Elliot Stern, the president of Saddleback College, argues implement term solutions to address student housing.

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FILE: Elliot Stern, the president of Saddleback College, estimates up to 15% of housing insecure.

Allen J. Schaben/Los Angeles Times/Getty Images

"My concern is that this might prevent us or delay us from doing so
instance, building student housing, which is really what the commu

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haven't had the funding," he said.

Saddleback plans to begin construction on a student housing project eight years from now, when Stern estimates the school will be able to save up the funding. For now, Saddleback provides students in need with food, clothing and emergency housing vouchers.

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But Stern worries allowing students to sleep in their cars will displace other resources at the school.

"The idea of letting them sleep in their cars and not bringing them in actually prevents us from doing a lot of the good work we do that we said. "To actually put shelter over someone and not just a car roof c

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But Long Beach City College has found the opposite to be true since implementing its safe parking program.

"It's also been an entry point for students to be connected with other resources on campus," said Corral. "... It's been able to allow us to triage students to ensure that they're receiving the support that they need, not just our safe parking."

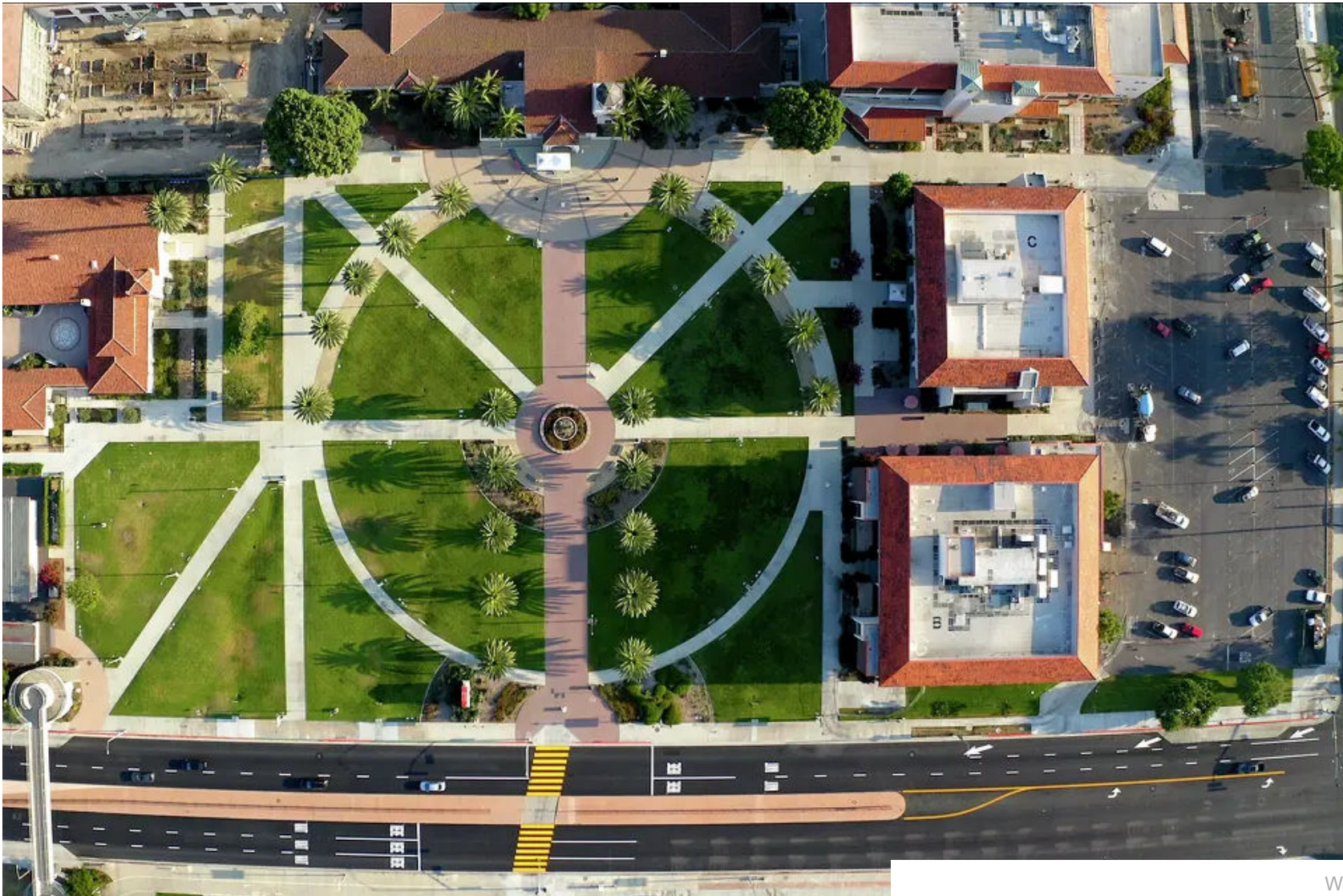
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FILE: Initially, Long Beach City College partnered with a private security program for night. But the school switched to using its own public safety employees to save the college's executive vice president of student services.

Getty Images

If a program like Long Beach City College's had existed at UCSD, it would have helped students like [redacted] who has since graduated and works as a legal assistant. In her spare time

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operate a safe parking program and to improve emergency housing policies by implementing more resources and follow-up appointments for homeless students — services she said she never received from the university. Though AB 90 would impact community colleges only, she hopes they'll establish a framework that the UCs can implement in the future.

"Ideally, nobody has to live out of their car, but until schools can guarantee four years of on-campus housing, I feel like it's just natural that [students] should be able to live out of their car on campus if they can't get housing on campus," she said.

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UCSD told SFGATE in a written statement that during the 2024-2025 school year, 149 students utilized the school's emergency housing resources. The school wrote it also provides meal assistance and works with students individually to help them find more stable housing.

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Johnson has since learned that UCSD does not turn away students who need additional time in emergency housing. But when she asked for extension after extension, she was worried about asking for more.

"I didn't want to push their good graces," she said. "When you are a homeless student, I think that there's kind of this worry in the back of your head about imposing or being an issue or taking advantage. It's embarrassing, and you do feel kind of a weird guilt about being homeless."

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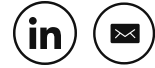


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**Summer Maxwell****EDITORIAL INTERN**

Summer Maxwell is a second-year master's student at the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism. Previously she covered education, incarceration, and politics for Richmond Confidential, the Tufts Daily, and the Student Dispatch. She also worked as a broadcast news intern and anchor at Arlington Community Media, Inc. A born-and-raised New Englander, Summer loves hiking, rock climbing, and hiding under an umbrella at the beach with a good book.

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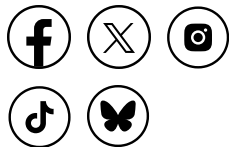
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