

Parking slots for handicapped

Tickets no longer warnings on May 1

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If you aren't handicapped, you should know that you risk a ticket if you park in a handicapped space in Rapid City.

But if you are handicapped, you might not realize that you, too, could soon be paying a \$25 fine if you don't properly display your parking permit.

Since a new ticketing program began two months ago, 25 trained volunteers have handed out more than 100 warning tickets to motorists illegally parked in handicapped spaces.

That's about half as many handicapped parking tickets as were issued in Rapid City in all of 1995, said Shelly Schock, outreach/advocacy coordinator for Western Resources for dis-Abled Independence.

In 1995, city traffic officers issued 218 tickets, 101 of which were paid. The rest were dismissed, most because drivers did have handicapped parking permits but did not have them properly displayed in their vehicles at the time.

"We will no longer dismiss those," Schock said. Her group's goal is to educate everyone about parking laws. That includes the approximately 28,806 South Dakotans who hold permanent or temporary handicapped parking permits.

Volunteer Jim McCoy has written more than 22 warning tickets. "They're trying to educate the non-handicapped people, but I think they should educate the handicapped people just as well," he said. "It's hard to enforce (the ordinance) if we can't see their sticker."

Seeing how hard it was for handicapped family members to find parking led McCoy to volunteer. He was not surprised at the number of violators, since handicapped parking laws are not always strictly enforced.

"People just took it for granted that they could (park there)," he said. When he hands violators a ticket, he often hears the same response: "Oh, I'm just parked here for a minute."

Too bad. Even if you are in your vehicle, you need a permit to park in a handicapped space.

Starting May 1, volunteers will be

issuing real tickets. They carry a \$25 fine, which can increase to \$100 if not paid promptly.

Even if you have a proper permit, you will be ticketed if you park on the striped lines next to a handicapped space. The stripes ensure adequate loading space for vans and cars. "The stripes are there for no parking, no matter who it is," Schock said.

So far, Rushmore Mall has had the most offenders. The mall also has more handicapped parking than any other building.

One volunteer has started ticketing at night, finding that more people park illegally then. Another woman changed her schedule after realizing she was giving out fewer tickets than she had been. "She seemed to be checking her route after church, and she wondered if that had anything to

do with it," Schock said, laughing.

Volunteer Pat Pfeifer tickets from her wheelchair. "I just got tired of going to stores ... and not being able to find a place to park," she said.

She hopes people realize volunteers aren't ticketing "to be mean. They (handicapped spots) are there for a reason, and I would gladly give up my handicapped spot if I could walk."

On her route, at least, the warning tickets may be paying off. "I think it has improved since we started doing this," Pfeifer said.

Ticketing motorists is just the start. Schock is

working with city officials to revise city policy to match the Americans With Disabilities Act.

For example, city policy requires two handicapped parking spaces per 100 total spaces. ADA requires twice that many handicapped spots.

"Hopefully we will get somewhere with that," Schock said.

'I just got tired of going to stores ... and not being able to find a place to park.'

— Pat Pfeifer, on why she volunteers to give out tickets, which she does from her wheelchair