

SAFETY MEASURES FOR GENDER-INTEGRATED SHELTERS

TIPSHEET #6

Gender integration provides an opportunity for a shelter to reassess and improve safety measures; at the same time, it's important to be prepared to counter the illusion that integrating survivors of all genders inherently makes a shelter less safe. All survivors seeking access to a shelter are doing so because of a need for safety, and survivors of all genders deserve support in feeling as secure as possible.

7 Tips For Maintaining Safety In Gender-Integrated Shelters

1. Train staff on safety concerns for transgender and gender non-binary survivors.

"Safety" is often discussed in subtle, coded ways that implicitly support the stereotype that heterosexual, non-trans women and children have to be kept safe from everyone else. In fact, far from being more likely to be predators, trans women, trans men, non-binary individuals, and lesbian, gay, and bisexual people are more likely to experience harassment and assault. Make sure staff are trained on specific safety concerns for trans, non-binary, and LGB survivors (such as those outlined below). As with other minority populations, trans survivors often have unique vulnerabilities and risks that may require added measures to keep them safe.

2. Improve screening protocols and training.

Too often, cultural stereotypes lead to men and masculine people automatically being assumed to be the perpetrators in situations involving intimate partner violence. When new survivors seek shelter, it's critical to not assume their gender, the gender of their perpetrator, their sexual orientation, or any other demographic about the survivor

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FORGE has over 50 hours of recorded webinars specifically focused on helping victim service providers provide better, more respectful services to trans survivors. Agencies are encouraged to select a webinar and view it during a staff meeting, with ample time to discuss and share what was learned.

<http://forge-forward.org/trainings-events/recorded-webinars>

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"Power and Control Tactics Specific to Trans People"

<http://forge-forward.org/2013/04/power-and-control-tactics>

or their relationship—survivors and perpetrators can be any gender. In addition, many (although not all) trans and LGB individuals are part of consensual open relationships and/or leather/kink culture, and these dynamics are sometimes misunderstood within domestic violence settings.

3. Maintain survivor confidentiality with respect to identity and experience.

All staff should be familiar with the VAWA Confidentiality and Privacy Provisions, signed by all shelters that receive funding from the Office on Violence Against Women. These provisions are an excellent resource and reminder of what information should not be shared. A key element of maintaining safety for trans and non-binary survivors is ensuring that details of individuals' gender history, body parts, name(s) on documentation and paperwork, and medications are kept confidential and never disclosed without consent. For example, some trans people move through the world as men and women without anyone ever questioning their gender, and their safety may be compromised if their gender history is disclosed without their consent. All trans people, and particularly non-binary individuals, should be allowed to share what would help them feel safest in a shelter in terms of housing, programming, and how they are referred to (name, pronouns, etc.).

4. Discuss housing options with trans and non-binary survivors.

Trans and non-binary survivors may have increased safety concerns with respect to bodily privacy. Fully discussing rooming options with these survivors is critical for them to be able to voice any concerns and for staff and survivor to jointly make placement decisions that will result in the best outcome. In cases where there is a choice between gender-specific and all-gender spaces, trans and non-binary survivors must be allowed to choose which option will feel safest for them. No one should be asked invasive questions as a way of determining placement in a domestic violence shelter or program, such as what sex they were assigned at birth, if they are taking hormones, if they have had surgery of any type, what gender marker is on their identification card(s), or how long they have been living/presenting in a particular way.

5. Establish clear and well-communicated bathroom policies.

Have bathroom policies that are clear, well communicated, and trans-inclusive. Be clear about expectations and how to respect each other—including how to behave in multiple-occupancy non-gender-specific bathrooms, if applicable. Some shelters assign bathroom spaces, others work out a bathroom schedule that works for everyone, and still others have policies that only one person can use a bathroom at a time (see *Tipsheet #5, Creating Trans-Inclusive Bathrooms in Shelters*, for more).

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“Runaway & Homeless Youth and Relationship Violence Toolkit: Screening and Assessment for Relationship Abuse”

<http://www.nrcdv.org/rhydvt toolkit/building-services/screening-assessment.html>

“ Gender-integrated shelters: IN THEIR OWN WORDS

For victims to feel safe, and in general, we need to make victims feel like a normal person so we don't separate them or make them feel different unless they want a separate bathroom space. Just make sure they have locks so they can do their business and feel comfortable.

6. Revisit general shelter security measures, and make sure all residents know about them.

Although integrating people of all genders into a shelter does not inherently create safety problems, reassessing and improving security measures is always a good idea. Measures that gender-integrated shelters report as particularly helpful include allowing residents to lock their bedroom doors, conducting regular daytime and night staff rounds of all areas of the shelter (including common areas and bathrooms), installing cameras in common areas, and providing alert buttons to residents who feel a need for additional security (using the same technology as medical alert buttons to call for help in an emergency). Your shelter may already be doing everything on this list and more. Making sure all residents know about the safety features of the shelter not only keeps them safer, but also helps them feel more at ease.

7. Establish clear and communicated procedures for reporting harassment and bullying.

Be clear with both staff and residents what the options and procedures are for reporting harassment or bullying—whether committed by a resident or a staff person—and deal with any complaints immediately with the utmost seriousness, as well as documenting corrective actions taken. Ensure that residents feel empowered to report such instances regardless of whether they personally experience them or simply witness them.

Thorough safety measures in a shelter can keep residents of all genders as safe as possible, and also provide survivors with invaluable peace of mind. By working hard to establish practices and policies that keep the most vulnerable and at-risk residents safe, all survivors benefit.

“ Gender-integrated shelters: IN THEIR OWN WORDS

All of the bedrooms lock and that helps people feel safe. Staff also check on people throughout the night to make sure that common areas are quiet and doors are secure. That helps people to feel secure. We do this whether or not there are men here—we don't treat men like the house is now on high alert or anything. It's what we always do.

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