

Emerging Practices to Enhance Safety at Congregate Shelters

Part 4: Building Trust



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Introduction

Each year, thousands of adults and children turn to homeless shelters for assistance. Loss of a job, lack of available services for mental health or substance use issues, lack of affordable housing, domestic violence, and other factors leave thousands of people without access to safe, stable housing. While shelters vary in size, mission, and approach, they can be key in helping people stabilize and move toward housing. Individuals who may have current or historical behavioral health issues or trauma may find a shelter environment to be intimidating, overwhelming, and unsafe. For these individuals, living on the streets may feel like a better option than navigating the complex structure of shelter environments. For some individuals, shelters are not an option, because they feel unsafe and traumatized within them.

Creating inclusive and welcoming communities is a fundamental part of the mission of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Toward that mission, this guide provides information to enhance safety measures for shelter operators, shelter staff, and guests.

Black, Indigenous, People of Color, individuals with disabilities, individuals who are members of the LGBTQ+ community, and other intersectional identities are overrepresented amongst people experiencing homelessness and within our homelessness response systems. Addressing the impact of disparities amplified by other systems requires intentionally different approaches for initiatives, practices, evaluation methods, and [data collection with equity](#). Communities engaged in meaningful partnerships and shared decision making with [individuals with lived experience in the local homeless response](#) systems design data collection processes and overall homeless response systems in ways that better meet the needs of those most impacted.

Communities employing a person-centered approach to reviewing current safety practices, protocols, and priorities will help establish a shelter environment anchored by:

- [Racial trauma and trauma informed practices](#),
- [Cultural humility](#); and
- [A persons first, data informed perspective](#).

This may increase the number of individuals experiencing homelessness who access shelter as part of ending their experience of homelessness.

Part 4 covers Building Trust. Other sections can be found on the [HUD Exchange](#). Part 4 highlights the importance of building relationships based on shared accountability, trust, respect, and dignity. Answering the below questions may assist a project in assessing how the shelter program builds relationships among guests and staff:

- How is community fostered for all?
- How does the organization ensure and support a diverse community, individual housing plan development, and individual progress towards self-sufficiency?
- How are trust, mutual respect, and collective problem-solving supported in the shelter community?
- How is repair enacted in the community after negative behaviors and/or varied expressions of violence?
- How is the community utilizing the voices of people with lived experience to enhance safety?

Building Trust

When program guests feel they are members of a community working toward a common goal, they are more likely to develop trust. From the first engagement with guests, staff can begin to build trusting relationships and create a sense of community. Staff and volunteers who consistently apply shelter policies and are committed to helping guests move into housing enhance trust among program guests. Trust can be diminished when guests feel they are viewed as a burden or treated unfairly. Building a welcoming and caring community within a shelter recognizes the interdependence among all members: staff, volunteers, and guests. Best practice is that both residents and staff are held accountable when standards of compassion and integrity are not met.

Shelters that support individual choice, foster dignity, and prioritize both emotional, mental, and physical safety will find that most guests are aware of and appreciative of this respectful approach. Similarly, projects that are punitive, high-barrier, and hierarchical get a poor reputation, and are underutilized by many experiencing homelessness. This is significant, because working to end one's experience of homelessness and acquire permanent housing often requires willingness to enter shelter, and then choose to stay while making significant changes or acquiring new skills. Designing an environment where guests feel safe and supported in taking these risks will help get them into stable housing as soon as possible.

For a guest to feel comfortable sharing information, they should know where and when that information might be shared. Confidentiality is critical when serving domestic violence, trafficking, and sexual assault survivors for safety reasons. It is also important for others to ensure that staff/volunteers are not sharing information about guests without their permission. This will keep them from being exploited or violating their trust and rights to their own story. Information should only be shared with a signed release form.

Progressing Towards Self-Sufficiency

Using a trauma-informed approach to deliver services increases physical, mental, and emotional safety. It encourages guests to use their voice and power as they make larger day-to-day decisions. Guests who have experienced domestic violence, trafficking, racism, discrimination, or any form of significant trauma may have learned not to trust their own perceptions or other people. Compassionate listening, small group discussions, and using their power to make basic decisions, helps individuals to face their trauma. As they regain their confidence, they may feel ready to create their own safety plans and participate in problem-solving.

- **Start with small decisions and choices.**

If a guest no longer trusts their own judgment, even a small decision can be paralyzing. If this is the case, help guests reestablish confidence in their own decision-making processes through small

choices. For example, offering water or coffee during the intake can give the individual a sense of ease and use the power of choice in the process.¹ As individuals are provided opportunities to make healthy safe choices, they develop/re-develop their trust in their capacity to make good decisions.

You can also create opportunities for guests to make decisions within their daily life. Staff may ask “Do you want to do one of the group activities tonight? Which one would you prefer?” or “Do you want a bed closer to a window or a door?” Choices within highly structured, large-scale projects may be limited by necessity, but finding ways to support guests by recognizing the importance of decision-making is a step towards their ability to regain a sense of control.

- **Provide real choices.**

Ensure that the choices you offer guests are real choices, whenever possible. For example, if the shelter policy is that all guests must shower before getting a bed, do not ask, “Would you like to get yourself clean in a nice hot shower tonight?” because if the guest says “No,” they will still need to take a shower. Instead ask, “Do you have a time preference for scheduling a shower?” The second option provides the guest the opportunity to use their power to make a choice based on their desired time without projecting judgment or staff preference.

In addition, best practice is to not offer negative choices. For example, do not say, “Do you want to calm down or do you want to leave?” Choices should be about positive action.

- **Set clear expectations and keep to a predictable schedule that will help guests anticipate and plan for their own needs.**

There is a natural tension between the shelter’s need to create a supportive structure and the flexibility needed for guests to use the shelter in a way that fosters independence. Projects should determine which regular events are best scheduled to allow predictability and support of community-wide rules (e.g., meal times, shower times, or lights out times), and where there are opportunities for guest choice and individual determinations (i.e., special accommodations for guests who work overnight shifts).²

- **Create opportunities for guests to contribute, thereby promoting a healthy interdependent living community.**

Assisting with appropriate upkeep of shelter spaces, daily administration/maintenance, and other activities can increase guests’ abilities to develop a sense of respect for the shelter, skills for managing a house, how to build and practice discipline, and responsibility. It can also increase their self-worth and help them to identify value within themselves and for their time at the shelter.

Staff should limit opportunities to those that are reasonably safe and be conscious of how disabilities and past experiences might impact an individual’s manner of contribution. Giving guests options for how they want to contribute is best. This should never be tied to a guest’s access to shelter.

1 http://www.ncdsv.org/images/odvn_trauma-informedcarebestpracticesandprotocols.pdf

2 Hopper, E., Bassuk, E. and Olivet, J. (2009). Shelter from the Storm: Trauma-Informed Care in Homelessness Services Settings. The Open Health Services andm Policy Journal, 2, 131-151. Retrieved from: http://www.ncdsv.org/images/odvn_trauma-informedcarebestpracticesandprotocols.pdf

- **Explain the reasons for a rule or requirement.**

This helps guests to understand why an agreement is in place. It helps them to make an informed decision about their actions. For instance, if a shelter is full, explain that there are currently no more beds, and you want to help them identify another setting (that meets their needs and/or safety concerns) by providing a list of alternative shelters and transportation options. You should also provide them with your operating hours, and the best time to come back to obtain a bed for the night. This provides the opportunity to find a different place to stay and affirms they will be welcome on a different night.

Respectful and Empathetic Interactions

When staff and guests interact in a mutually respectful manner, they can improve communication and work on establishing and maintaining trusting relationships. It can take time to engage guests, especially those with an extensive lived experience of homelessness, and individuals or families entering homelessness for the first time. A key to effective engagement is to identify and acknowledge the individuality of each guest and work with them in a manner that will help support their progress to self-sufficiency. Common approaches that may help guests to feel a sense of belonging and that they are supported are noted below:



- **Engage with guests as individuals.**

While there are common experiences within populations, staff should not make assumptions about a guest's culture based on skin color, religion, or ethnicity. To determine the best approach to building rapport with a guest, staff should consider the individual's age, country of origin, identity, culture, and upbringing. Staff should interact with guests and respectfully ask questions about their experiences, and share their own experiences as relevant and appropriate.

- **Use correct pronouns.**

Staff should use the gender pronoun that a guest requests. For example, if a guest says they use

“she/her/hers” pronouns, staff should refer to the guest as “she.” Some guests may use “they/them/their” or other pronouns. For example: “Joe checked into the shelter tonight. They asked about the shower schedule.” Adhering to preferred pronouns can help guests feel welcomed, respected, and safe. For a fuller explanation of preferred pronouns, please refer to the [Equal Access for Transgender People: Supporting Inclusive Housing](#).

- **Check in with guests frequently.**

This allows staff to maintain awareness of the community’s climate and prevent conflicts before they occur. Some shelters use their initial hour to greet guests, learn names of new guests, and check in about needs or concerns.

- **Recognize that guests' needs and challenges change.**

Staff should consider stressors and other factors that may reasonably impact an individual's resilience and motivation. For example, the act of getting ready, choosing to go, and walking across the street to attend therapy might be a significant challenge for an individual depending on physical and mental health factors.

Encourage and celebrate guests’ accomplishments, large and small. Focus on a strengths-based approach. Survivors of trauma may need extra support and encouragement as abuse may have left long lasting effects on self-esteem and mental health.

- **Learn to predict common triggers to anticipate days when individuals may have less patience or resilience.**

For example, guests who are already feeling isolated may experience heightened loneliness during holidays if they have lost custody of their children or are apart from other family members. Acknowledging that it is normal for holidays to be a difficult time and to have complicated feelings can help validate guests' experiences. Extra staffing on duty that day might help to de-escalate increased tensions and provide the opportunity for staff to sit and listen to guests' struggles/concerns. Having shelter community activities on these days can provide a sense of connection and may redirect guests temporarily.

- **Do not threaten, insult, or judge guests.**

Yelling, loud voices, name calling, profanity, condescending tones, or stigmatizing guests based on their lived experience or identity is counterproductive to building trust.

- **Remain non-judgmental.**

Guests may have coping mechanisms that differ from a typical adult due to trauma and living through extreme circumstances. Empathy can help staff remain non-judgmental. Out on the street, behaviors such as yelling, swearing, and a willingness to fight to protect oneself and one’s space are valued. When individuals are not well rested and nourished, their capacities for constructive problem-solving and patience diminish. Like many victims of assault, people experiencing

Projects should provide clear guidance to staff and volunteers around the amount of personal information it is acceptable to disclose in the context of delivering services. While personal connections and similar experiences can be powerful tools to establishing rapport, having a firm understanding of the limits may circumvent unnecessary interpersonal conflict.

homelessness may be on guard against an attack. Their awareness is elevated, and, as a result, their reactions may be more aggressive than expected. Staff should learn to recognize this hypervigilance without judgment. Once a guest feels safe in a shelter, they can begin to learn to trust one's own perceptions enough to believe they are safe and re-learn methods of communication.

- **Treat the guest's experience as authentic.**

Listening to and accepting a guest's experiences as authentic can help to establish trust between a guest and staff. Acknowledging feelings and providing help thinking through options may be helpful. For example, a case manager could respond to a guest's concern that another shelter guest is watching them and making them feel uncomfortable by saying, "I hear you. It's our job to keep both of you safe. Let's discuss some options, and you can choose what works best for you."

- **Addressing Self-Harm and Suicidality.**

With an increased prevalence of severe mental illness among individuals experiencing homelessness and the elevated risk of depression in populations who suffer from trauma, staff may encounter both self-harming behaviors and suicidality.

Establish and communicate clear rules around substance use in shelter, including resources for support and treatment, harm reduction services, and referrals to more appropriate settings if someone is struggling with shelter rules around use, curfews, etc.

In addition, shelters should train staff to recognize common self-injurious or self-threatening behavior and be familiar with the procedures to quickly get guests the appropriate level of help. Staff should be aware of resources tailored to specific communities. For example, crisis hotlines or counseling services in the language spoken by the guests, by and for transgender people, or in the religious tradition of guests might be particularly helpful.

Some shelters may choose to train staff to screen for suicidality and self-harming behaviors and in the use of Narcan or EpiPens to prevent overdose or anaphylaxis. Others shelters may rely on external partners such as mental health crisis teams. Staff should understand who to contact, where to find the emergency numbers, and what to expect in these situations in order to ultimately reduce harm. Staff should be trained in self-monitoring, self-care, and resources to address any stressors that can impact work and engagement of guests.

The complex topic of harm reduction is covered by many national organizations in much more depth than can be accomplished in the scope of this document. Below are resources for additional information:

[National Alliance on Mental Illness](#)

[National Institute of Health National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#)

[SAMHSA](#)

- **Maintaining a Welcoming, Safe, and Respectful Setting.**

Maintaining a guest's enrollment in the shelter while the individual accesses necessary resources to move into permanent housing is the best outcome for shelter guests. Programs should train staff how to de-escalate inappropriate and unsafe behaviors with a focus on mitigating the risk of suspending a shelter guest. Training staff to effectively intervene in these situations supports reasonable expectations around safety while building guests' skills to navigate conflict. Unacceptable and unsafe behaviors include harassment or violence. According to the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), harassment "may include, but is not limited to, offensive jokes, slurs, epithets or name calling, physical assaults or threats, intimidation, ridicule or mockery, insults or put-downs, offensive objects or pictures.

Policies that acknowledge that mistakes are inevitable and will be made by both guests and staff can set the tone for collaboration among staff and guests to arrive at the most reasonable response to a specific infraction. At one large congregate shelter, staff recognized an effective method of "tapping out" after stopping an escalating situation by having a colleague step into the role of assigning a consequence. While not possible at all shelters due to staffing constraints, the "tapping out" approach used in this particular shelter resulted in staff feeling supported by their coworkers and guests feeling the process was more equitable and less personal.

A person's lack of conflict management skills, history of trauma, or other factors such as extended time living on the street, may result in behavior and actions that require staff to suspend an individual from a project. This intervention is among the most severe and should be reserved for infractions and conduct that warrant this level of consequence. The practices described below can help staff prevent violence while at the same time preserving guests' trust.

Clear policies/ rules must be established and communicated to staff and guests about suspending a guest including:

- Verbal warning (including steps a guest is expected to take to address these concerns)
- Written warning (including steps a guest is expected to take to address these concerns)
- Suspension (including what a guest needs to do to regain shelter entry and access to services)
- Appeal process

- **Creating an environment that allows for mistakes and growth.**

Once there has been a mistake or an incident, it can be helpful to listen to a guest's perception of the situation. This allows staff to more clearly understand a guest's reasoning for their action and can help the guest determine the most effective way to prevent it from reoccurring. If a policy has been misapplied or a supervisor determines the infraction did not elicit the appropriate response from project staff, the context and manner in which this is communicated is critical to maintaining trust from both staff and shelter guests. This includes staff taking accountability for their actions

and repairing their relationship with the guest. When guests make a mistake that requires a suspension, staff can clearly communicate that while there are immediate, mandated consequences, guests are encouraged to return to the shelter after the sanction is lifted. This will build trust and reinforce the message that project staff are there to help and are anticipating a guest's return to resume accessing services.

Collaborative Problem-Solving

Collaborative problem-solving is a method that allows all individuals to become part of the solution and take steps together to encourage mutually respectful behaviors. While originally created for children, it has been widely adapted for adult populations. It also helps guests develop or redevelop healthy living patterns required for everyday self-regulation, resilience, and positive human interactions, which will be necessary to remain housed.



- **Establish clear standards for acceptable behavior.**
Clear and standard procedures for responding to violence, harassment, threats, and intimidation guide staff on effective and consistent ways to intervene
- **Teach staff and guests basic collaborative problem-solving skills.**
When rules are broken or a guest is upset, staff may sit with guests to try and solve the problem in a mutually agreeable way. It is best practice to listen, use reflective language, and be empathetic to the guest's perspective, approaching the conversation in a way that does not prioritize power or compliance. [Assess what a guest might need](#) in order to engage in problem-solving. The goal is to guide the guest to make a plan for taking personal responsibility and an opportunity to change their behavior.

- **Ask staff or guests for input about what they need to feel safe.**

When a guest or staff member is the victim of an incident, asking them for input about what they need to feel safe or what next steps they think are appropriate can help them regain a sense of agency and feel like their needs are being met. Making time for repair or [restorative justice circles](#) can help shelters model their commitment to physical and emotional safety.

- **Community-based shelters.**

Supporting guests to feel comfortable and safe in and around the shelter neighborhood is an equally important safety measure. Some shelters have found outreach to neighbors, local businesses, or other service organizations who agree to act as neighborhood watch helps everyone to feel safer. In addition, there is often a reduction in the amount of “nuisance calls” that may be made to the police. Guests should immediately report to staff if they are feeling unsafe, including being solicited outside of the shelter property. Supporting the shelter “neighbors” as part of guest and community safety can be accomplished with a Good Neighbor Policy.

Creating a Good Neighbor Policy with those who live or work in proximity to the shelter can diminish tension between guests and the neighborhood. Staff and guests could clean up trash surrounding the shelter to maintain a good relationship with neighbors. Community Food Shelves, Clothing Shelves, barbeques or other events can help develop and maintain relationships that focus on the community and the shelter mutually supporting each other. Additionally, staff may want to give neighbors within a half-mile of the shelter a direct phone line to the shelter so they can call if they ever have a concern, to reduce involving law enforcement. For an example of one shelter’s Good Neighbor Policy, see [Attachment 1](#).

Attachment 1

Sample Good Neighbor Policy

Good Neighbor Policy

Our shelter is dependent upon the support of our neighbors, the city where our program is located, and the state. As a guest, participant, or tenant, your behavior reflects on the shelter and affects the perception of programs and services you depend on every day. Our program is part of a neighborhood and this neighborhood includes families with children. It is important that we be respectful and considerate of residents, property, and the surrounding neighborhood by following these guidelines:

- **Please do not loiter or hang around the perimeter of the building. Do NOT park vehicle(s) on the property.**
- **Please refrain from yelling, swearing, loud conversations, or causing a disturbance while in the community or on the property.**
- **Please use the bathrooms that are available inside the shelter. Do not urinate or defecate outside. Do not spit.**
- **Please be respectful of our neighbors, their property, and the surrounding neighborhood.**
- **Please keep the neighborhood clean. Do not litter. Place your trash in a barrel.**
- **Please wear appropriate clothing while inside the building and around the neighborhood.**
- **Do not engage in any illegal activity. Illegal activity includes the use of illegal drugs, drinking in public, or illegal sexual activity, all of which will be reported to the police immediately.**
- **Please comply with all policies pertaining to the shelter and its vendors.**

**Failure to follow these guidelines may
result in a Suspension of Services**