

TRAINING SCENARIO

3

Equal Access Expectations

Setting: An eight-bed women's shelter has a shared bathroom and shower. Amanda has been in the program for a week. She is a transgender woman, and while she shared this with staff, she has chosen not to disclose this to any of the shelter residents. She has just come from the bathroom feeling anxious and concerned about other residents following the rules. The bathroom door has a reminder on it that shelter policy is to keep it shut at all times. Other women at the shelter regularly stand in the doorway and chat or use the shower, which is closed off in a single stall, with the main bathroom door open.

Amanda: I need to talk to you. I'm having a problem with some of the other ladies.

Mary: Let's go into the office where we can have some privacy.

Mary takes Amanda into one of the counseling rooms.

Amanda: I'm having a problem with the bathroom. The other women are keeping the door open and I have no privacy. I really need to have the door closed, but I don't want to confront them. It's hard enough here without everyone thinking I want special treatment.

Mary: We can handle this without disclosing anything about our conversation. Shelter policy is that the bathroom door should stay closed, so it's not really about you complaining—staff should pay more attention to the door. We really want you to be successful here. Let me know if there's anything else you need.

During the evening house meeting, staff members discuss the importance of respecting and supporting one another's privacy in a congregate setting and have the group brainstorm ways to ensure privacy. Mary acknowledges the staff has not been doing a great job of enforcing the rule regarding the bathroom door and commits to enforcing it more consistently. Amanda's concern is not mentioned at all during the group conversation.

The following exercises incorporate best practices to assist project frontline staff and management in fostering an inclusive shelter community.

TRAINING SCENARIO 3 CONTINUED

These steps supported non-discrimination, respect for individuals, and confidentiality

- › The staff person demonstrates respect for the client by taking her concerns seriously and addressing them.
- › The staff person preserves confidentiality by privately discussing the issue with the client and resolving it without revealing her complaint to other clients.
- › The shelter employs gender-inclusive language in project material and pamphlets. This assures clients that they can bring concerns to staff and will be heard with respect.

Discussion points about harassment

- › The perceived “unfair” distribution of privileges may draw further unwanted attention to a transgender client, or any client. In such cases, staff should intervene by redirecting or resolving complaints raised by other clients without reviewing the staff’s decision, as it may touch on confidential aspects of another client’s life. There is a variety of resolutions that may be perceived as special treatment for any client. Staff must be careful to implement policies fairly and consistently to reinforce that all clients can expect the same treatment from staff.

Questions to consider

- › Have you experienced similar situations with clients?
- › What techniques (house meeting, individual follow-up, etc.) allow staff members to address these issues without breaking clients’ confidentiality?
- › How does your shelter encourage clients to report harassment and how does it promote a safe environment?
- › How does your shelter create a safe atmosphere within bathroom and shower facilities that respects client modesty?

Ideas for intervening

- › The difference between an individual’s gender identity and their sex assigned at birth is confidential medical information.
- › If a transgender client has chosen not to disclose their trans status, then staff must respect this decision.
- › Staff and residents should not expect a client who is a member of a marginalized population to educate others about their community. Shelters should provide staff access to educational resources, and it is the staff member’s professional obligation to use these resources if they require additional information to meet the shelter’s goals.