

TRAINING SCENARIO

Equal Access Expectations

Setting: A 5-bed transitional living program for young adults, ages 18 to 24. Alex, 18, is questioning their gender identity and has chosen to use the pronouns they/them/their to indicate not being aligned with either end of the gender spectrum. Their gender expression is neutral and the housemates have been giving them a hard time. Staff member, Susan, has her office door open and hears the following conversation:



Trish: Alex, why were you in the girl's bathroom? You dress and act like a guy. None of us even want you around.

Alex: Whatever, I can be where I want. Get out of my face.

Susan steps out, sees that Trish is physically close to Alex, and that she is blocking the hallway. Several residents are standing around them.

Susan: Trish, this conversation is over. You're in Alex's physical space and blocking the hallway. The staff explained the house rules to you when you got here. This is unacceptable. I want you to talk to your counselor tonight. Picking on someone else is disrespecting everyone in the program and the staff.

Susan: Everyone, you have things you should be doing. Go do them.

Once the hall clears out, Susan checks in with Alex to see how they're doing and underscore that the shelter wants this to be a safe environment for them and for everyone staying there. Susan reminds Alex that recognizing and expressing gender identity is Alex's choice and assures them that they are welcome at this shelter regardless of their decision to disclose or not disclose any part of their identity.

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

TRAINING SCENARIO 4 CONTINUED

These steps supported non-discrimination, respecting individuals and confidentiality

- » The staff person upholds project rules by intervening quickly to stop Trish's verbal and physical harassment.
- » The staff person preserves confidentiality by having a private conversation with Alex to discuss the impact and support their safety.
- » The staff person promotes non-discrimination by ensuring all of the clients understand that verbal and physical bullying are not allowed, are violations of the project rules and show disrespect to the entire community.
- » The staff person discusses safety concerns with the client and recognizes it is Alex's right to access services they are eligible for.

Discussion points about harassment

- » A client may initiate a discussion with staff regarding the inaccurate perception that another client's gender expression threatens their health or safety. It is important to both educate clients and maintain all clients' confidentiality. No discussion should be about specific individuals in the shelter. Staff can use this opportunity to discuss the priorities of the project, to serve everyone who is eligible, to reinforce that staff are responsible for safety and are careful only eligible clients are enrolled, or to review the complaining client's case plan and refocus their attention to making progress moving out of shelter.
- » Policies permitting requests for new bed or service assignment differs from project to project. If your project regularly moves people around, then consider more flexible policies. If, however, your project is unable to accommodate these requests without creating a heavy burden, policies may need to be less flexible. For instance, allowing a roommate to request a new assignment based on another client's gender expression or transgender status, with less flexible policies staff may need to instruct clients to focus on their own needs and concentrate on their progress. While at a more flexible project, where changes are made in response to a variety of requests (interpersonal conflict, closer or further from the bathroom, etc.) could accommodate a change request.

- » Staff may not reject an eligible client based on a staff member's safety concerns related to a client's gender identity. While every effort should be made to express any staff concerns and staff can encourage the use of individual rooms, beds close to staff workstations or other accommodations, ultimately, the decision to accept those recommendations is the client's.

Questions to consider

- » Have you experienced similar situations with clients?
- » Were they resolved in accordance to the Equal Access Rule?
- » If things escalated, what would result in Trish's expulsion from this shelter and how would that be handled?

Ideas for Intervening

- » "Okay everyone, let's remember that this shelter is a place where everyone is welcome. If you make someone feel out of place or encourage them to leave, we may have to ask you to leave the project."
- » Remind specific individuals of their chores or obligations for the evening to break up a social interaction.
- » Ask two or three members of the group to meet privately in the staff office immediately. Discuss the rules for respecting everyone at the shelter and review their signed conduct agreements while pointing out the conversation you just witnessed was inconsistent with this agreement.