

Physical “Fixes” that help programs minimize rules

Thinking creatively about physical space can help us eliminate rules and conflict by eliminating the source of problems. It is always preferable to control physical space versus trying to control women’s behavior. Below is a list of ideas from programs around the state that have helped eliminate the need for rules.

Food/ Meds/ Valuables:

- Food lockers
- Locking safes in women’s rooms for medications and valuables
- The Walla Walla wall’o’fridges solution: individual refrigerators in locking cabinets
- Rooms with locks on the doors

Communal living:

- Individual apartments instead of communal living
- One family per room instead of multiple
- Private bathrooms
- At least one room with private bath to accommodate older boys
- TV’s in each women’s room rather than one communal tv in the living room
- Multiple places to watch tv
- Plenty of any hotly sought after toy
- Multiple couches and comfortable chairs
- Multiple phones and TTY machines, as needed by the population

Security and entry after staff leaves:

- Hotel style keys for entry to the shelter
- Real estate lock box for entry to the shelter
- Fingerprint technology for shelter entry
- Night security guard

Cooking/Cleaning/Chores

- Hiring a cook who makes dinner or cleans up
- Hiring cleaners to do deep cleaning once a month or once a week
- Half or full time housekeeper to clean and organize
- Adequate storage, shelving, and closet organizers to make keeping room clean and orderly easier

Supervising Children

- Safe children’s outside play area with no street access
- Ensuring physical spaces support safety: for example ensuring good sight lines between the kitchen and living/play areas where children are likely to be when mothers are cooking
- A safe way for women to smoke and supervise their children at the same

Making Physical “Fixes” Work

“What do we do when we can’t afford to make changes?”

Shelter programs around the state range in size and resources. Still, programs of all sizes and resources have reported that they have been focusing on what they can do now and then putting their dreams for more costly solutions into longer term plans. Programs have said that putting energy into physical fixes takes time and money upfront, but much less time and stress in the long run. An example would be that putting effort into asking for a donation of TV’s for each room will then save much more time trying to enforce rules about the TV every day.

“What can I do if these ideas don’t work for our space?”

Some of these ideas will not apply to all spaces. What ideas *do* apply? What programs in Washington State are similar in size and structure to the one I work in? Can I call them and ask them how they do house meetings or meals?

Also, many programs have worked out space and program structure while planning a move, new building or remodel of their current shelters. Programs report that thoughtful planning of space while considering how to minimize rules makes a space that is more comfortable for everyone.

“How can I get the people I work with to go for this? We are all so busy!”

Shelter work is complex and can be stressful. Sometimes it feels like we are operating in “survival mode.” A challenge of working in circumstances where there is high need and limited resources make it seem easier to simplify in ways that may become punitive to survivors. Ask yourself, how much time do you take resolving conflict around rules or chores? Some programs have found that minimizing rules has freed up more time, and greatly reduced staff burnout. Change takes time and financial commitment up front, but may save time and money in the long run.

I want to do make some changes around rules, but I have more questions. What now?

Check out the WSCADV Shelter Support Project for shelter specific training, technical assistance, model protocols, articles and listserv information.

www.wscadv.org

“The changes we need to make require lots and lots of money, and that is really frustrating.”

-Shelter Advocate

“When I wanted to implement some physical fixes and we didn’t have the money, I went to the community and asked for it. I can’t believe how much you can get when you ask for it!”

-Shelter Advocate

“We tell women that they have power over their lives, and then we feel like we can’t make changes because we feel powerless to find the funding or time.”

-Program Director