

# How We Gave Up Curfew (and a lot of other rules, too)

WASHINGTON STATE COALITION

**WSCADV**

AGAINST DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

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The Women's Support Shelter at the YWCA Pierce County in Tacoma is the longest-running shelter for victims of domestic violence in the state of Washington. Opened in 1976, the program has seen a lot of changes in its 30 years of operation. In January of 2005, our lead staff sat down to discuss how our program was running—what do we do, how do we do it, why do we do it? These questions lead to more questions, and an examination of our commitment to the principles of Advocacy-Based Counseling.

We examined our program in terms of:

- o what we are obligated to do under our funding contracts
- o the governing WAC (Washington Administrative Code 388-61A)

But also (and perhaps more importantly) thought in terms of:

- o our own unique role in the grand scheme of things and our philosophy

We asked:

- o what *can't* we change?
- o what *can* we change?
- o and, if we can change it, *should* we?

### **Reasoning/Process for Rules Review:**

In order to find answers to these questions, we did some research. We called other shelters to find out what kind of rules they had and how they implemented their services. We looked back through past files and previous policies and procedures to see what we had done in the past and if we could determine the things that had worked well and the things that had not.

We found a lot of variation; some programs we called had a lot more rules than ours, some had almost none at all. Some programs were similar to ours, in that they were located in an urban setting with a large

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capacity; some were rural and had only a few bed spaces. Some were well established and some were very new programs.

While most of our funding contracts contain specific language about what services will be provided by the program receiving funding, only the Administrative Code contained information about *how* those services were to be provided: through Advocacy-Based Counseling.<sup>1</sup>

While this has been the standard we had accepted for as long as it had been a part of our contractual obligations, we began to see that it had not been the true *practice* of our program over the course of our history. While the WAC is very specific about facility requirements and so forth, measuring a program’s “empowerment of clients through reinforcing the client’s autonomy and self-determination,” is not as easy as making sure that chemicals aren’t stored with food. Yet this is the essence of what we truly desired for our clients and our program. Realizing this, we began systematically reviewing all of our rules, procedures, and policies to see if our actions matched up to our ideals.

#### Separating the necessary from unnecessary rules

Many of our “shelter rules” were related to our particular space—that is, we have a 1928 building with limited space, at an address that is not confidential. We have an entire system set up (our “Jane Doe” system) to address confidentiality at a location that is not confidential. The rules related safety in our particular space were still relevant. We did not change them, because the system in place works for keeping client information confidential, both for staff

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<sup>1</sup>Advocacy-based counseling means the involvement of a client with an advocate counselor in an individual, family, or group session with the primary focus on safety planning and on empowerment of the client through reinforcing the client's autonomy and self-determination. Advocacy-based counseling uses non victim blaming problem-solving methods that include: Identifying the barriers to safety; Developing safety checking and planning skills; Clarifying issues; Providing options; Solving problems; Increasing self-esteem and self-awareness; and Improving and implementing skills in decision making, parenting, self-help, and self-care.

and the clients themselves. Other rules we have in place are related to health and safety issues (e.g., “the front door is to remain secure, do not prop it open at any time,” or “do not block fire exits”).

However, some of our rules did not seem to have a reason. When we asked, “why do we do it this way,” the only answer we could come up with was “because that’s the way it has always been done.”

The rules we decided to change had some common themes. Rules that had no logical explanation other than “this is the way it has always been done” were deleted. We found many of our rules unnecessarily controlling, and found they did not foster the environment of empowerment that we wanted to create in our program.

We knew that we could not realistically be a “no rules” program. The reality of 50 people living communally means that staff and residents need some rules to avoid chaos and accommodate a safe, healthy and respectful living environment for everyone present. Thus we have rules aimed at ensuring that common spaces are not “thrashed,” cooking areas meet health codes, bathrooms remain functional, and all residents have the opportunity to feel safer physically, mentally, and emotionally at the shelter than at home with their abuser. For us, the main thing was to look at everything we do, and everything we expect of our clients, and see how that measures up with Advocacy-Based Counseling.

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### **What we are trying to control and why? The case of the laundry room key**

When we examined the rules, we realized we were trying to control much more of the residents’ daily lives than we needed to.

For example, we changed a rule regarding how we facilitate residents using our laundry room area. While at the shelter program, each family does their own laundry, including their towels and bed linens. We used to have a sign up sheet in the shelter office where residents could check out the key for this room and

have a two-hour slot in which to use the laundry room. Because we have ongoing problems with theft, we thought that this system would help alleviate any theft issues with the laundry area. But it meant that the shelter staff had to spend time checking whose turn it was, unlocking the room when the key was missing and/or tracking down the key, and so forth. In general, there was a lot of tension between staff and residents and amongst residents around laundry, and theft did not decrease.

When we thought in terms of empowerment about the functions of daily living that residents need to accomplish within our space, we realized that we had created a lot of unnecessary work for ourselves with our laundry room system, and had not solved any problems. Theft still occurred because people left the room unlocked, but having the key gave them a false sense of security so they did not pay attention to their items. As we discussed this, we concluded that if someone was living at home or in an apartment building, they would go to the Laundromat or apartment laundry room and be responsible for their own wash in their own time. In line with our goal of creating an environment where residents could control their own lives, accomplish their daily tasks according to their own schedule, and be responsible for their own things, we stopped controlling the laundry room. No key, no schedule, no involvement. Instead of shelter advocates taking time each day to “police” the laundry room, they are free to do advocacy. As a result, theft in the laundry room has gone down significantly, because residents now attend to their belongings when they are doing their wash.

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The program had numerous practices which, after reviewing them in light of empowerment and Advocacy-Based Counseling, we found to be controlling for no apparent reason. We used to keep the kitchens locked, saying that it would keep children from playing in there unattended, or that if someone left a big mess we would know who did it and have them clean it up. But we never did know who left the big messes, in spite of the rule, because no one had time to monitor the kitchens all day. The rules regarding restricted

kitchen access created an atmosphere in which residents viewed shelter advocates similar to Corrections Officers—someone there to tell you what to do and keep tabs on you. This undermined staff's ability to provide real advocacy. So we got rid of all our rules and procedures that put up barriers to clients taking back control of their lives.

### **Curfew: the big one**

The biggest and most controversial rule that we did away with was curfew. For as long as anyone could remember, our program had a curfew of 11:00 p.m. on weeknights, 12:00 a.m. on Friday and Saturday nights. People who did not come back at curfew were given a 15- to 30-minute window in which to call or show up, and received a written “warning” that if they missed curfew again they could be exited from the program. People later than that were considered “non-occupied” from the program and exited. Looking back through client files from years past, I saw that staff had placed some clients on a “do not admit” list because they had missed curfew (non-occupied the program) multiple times. This is not something we are proud to admit, but the truth is that our program had been very punitive in the past. Coming to terms with this has allowed us to improve our work.

Staff had divergent approaches to curfew enforcement, and feelings ran so strong, the curfew rule impeded staff cohesiveness. Advocates who worked the night shift faced ethical crises on a daily basis as a result of the curfew rules, having to decide to who let in or not after curfew. Some questioned how an agency supposedly in existence to provide safety to those who need it could put someone out on the street in the middle of the night just because they were 20 minutes late. Others said that if someone was truly concerned about their safety then they would not even go out at night; others said staying out late was obviously indicated substance use or prostitution. Other staff maintained they would let in women with children who were late for curfew, but not single

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residents; yet others let in curfew violators if the children were babies but not if they were teens.

Then there were all the judgments and conversations about what was a legitimate excuse for being late, and who lied about their excuse, how we knew they were lying, and so on. Looking back, the way we did things seems really crazy—to the point of being unthinkable, but that is the reality of what we did. And, at the time, we felt justified in our reasoning for doing it.

We realized that at our program, the way we managed our curfew did not empower women, and we did not ever enforce the curfew in a truly objective manner. When we started analyzing the impacts of curfew, we realized that residents who would come back after curfew for reasons that would be non-compliant with the program rules anyway (using drugs or breaking confidentiality), would probably not remain in the program long with or without a curfew. And we realized that those who missed curfew for other reasons (like transportation problems), were being unduly penalized. For us, doing away with the curfew has not necessarily made a difference in who stays in the program or who participates in the program, but it has gone a long way toward creating a more empowering atmosphere.

Because we do want and need to have space available for those who truly need it, we instituted a daily check-in process. We do this because if someone is using shelter space, we want to make sure they are actually staying in the shelter. We also want to have that face-to-face opportunity to show each person our support, be in touch with what is happening with them on a daily basis, advocate for them, and help them implement their safety plans, etc. Since we are staffed 24/7 and have a good security system, shelter access is not a problem for women coming in late and each resident can “check-in” with staff at a time that works for them.

When we decided to eliminate the curfew rule, we agreed that it would not hurt to try a new approach to our services, especially one that is designed to

promote empowerment. If rule changes don't work, we can always change them back. We want to create a program that is truly focused on empowerment, safety, self-esteem building, and all the other components of the WAC, and to do that, we realized, we needed to give some new ideas a try.

### Results (so far):

Since changing our rules to be less punitive, we have experienced a substantial increase in our average length of stay, as well as the level of participation in support services such as weekly case management and support/education meetings. Our data supports the positive impacts of our rule changes. In the one-year time period since changing our rules, our average shelter stay has gone from 35 days in 2004 to 41 days in 2005.

We have had less conflict with residents over “little” things, and advocates have had more time to focus on safety planning, resource referral, and *actually being available to do advocacy!* They spend more time listening and less time enforcing rules. Residents get more encouragement to take back control of their own lives, are empowered to state their needs clearly and directly, and can expect to be treated with respect and like the adults they are—responsible for their own decisions. Staff have expressed appreciation that they are being supported in “working smarter, not harder,” and have also stated that they feel an overall improvement in the atmosphere of the program. So far in our experience, less has definitely been more.

Karin White Tautfest has been at the YWCA Pierce County for 6 years, with the last four in the role of Shelter Director. Her educational background is in criminal justice.

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