

General Recommendations Regarding Shelter Policies

- *Rules/policies/guidelines should positively reflect your agency's mission and values.*

All the written material a program gives women, including rules/guidelines/program policies should be friendly and invite cooperation, collaboration and mutual accountability in their tone and wording.

- *Rules/guidelines/program policies should make a distinction between behaviors that facilitate communal living and behaviors that threaten a resident's ability to stay at the shelter.*

Whether or not someone cleans the kitchen on time is not a threat to safety or harmonious communal living on the same level as whether or not they bring a gun into the building. Our approach and policies should reflect that. In general, rules and policies should *not* result in requiring women to leave the program because they didn't do chores consistently, slept in the living room or other behaviors that would be acceptable in one's own home.

Best practices separate out information and expectations about communal living (detailed information about cleaning, diaper disposal, chores, bathroom use, etc.) from the sorts of things that threaten safety (guns, drugs, threats of violence). Whenever possible, give information about communal living *outside* the context of rules (i.e., during shelter tours, through modeling, house meetings, etc.) As a general rule, if you would not make a woman leave over it, it should not be in the rules.

When a woman first arrives, it is not necessary to go into great detail how people get kicked out of the program; this can be alienating and feel threatening. Orienting women to the policy about warnings and exits can be done if/when an advocate must talk to her about problems meeting expectations or guidelines.

- *Generally, we should strive to focus on advocacy versus rule enforcement.*

If advocates are spending the bulk of their time on rule enforcement, precious resources are being misused. An emphasis on rule enforcement over advocacy undermines trusting relationships between residents and staff, and can result in low staff morale as well.

It can help to keep in mind that when a woman breaks a rule, it is a great opportunity to find out what her real needs are. Unless the rule violation created a clear danger to others in the program and it is simply untenable to have the resident stay, a good advocate will work to find out what the issues are behind the rule problem. (For example, if the resident is not doing chores and staying in bed, is it because she is depressed and needs help with that? If the resident has not kept all children within eyesight, is it because she needs a break or some respite care?)

➤ *Control the environment, not the residents:*

Create a physical environment that supports following the rules. If multiple residents repeatedly have difficulty with a particular rule over time, ask yourself if it is possible that a physical fix could alleviate the problem. For example, instead of emphasizing “no stealing” instead provide women a safe place to lock up their valuables. If women are required to keep children in sight, ensure that a safe play area is visible from the kitchen, so women can watch their children while they cook. Or if residents have difficulty keeping their rooms clean, is it because they don’t have enough closet and shelf space to organize belongings? How can neat storage be facilitated?

➤ *A great book about rules, policies and practices in shelters:*

Parenting in Public by Donna Haig Friedman is an *excellent* book for any shelter director, manager or advocate who wants to think carefully about rules and how they affect women’s and children’s experiences in shelter. WSCADV has several copies and the book can be found on Amazon.com as well.

Model Rights and Responsibilities

From the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence

Our Program has set up the following rights and responsibilities to clarify expectations and roles and to help keep harmony in the shelter where multiple families and individuals live together and share common spaces. We hope you will keep the common good and others' safety and comfort in mind while living here.

You have the right to be respected

You have the right to be treated with respect and without discrimination on the basis of national origin, religion, race, color or sexual orientation by everyone who lives and works here.

You have the right to be heard.

1. We encourage residents to deal with conflicts directly with the people involved whenever possible. If you need help to resolve a conflict, staff is available to facilitate a meeting. If a conflict with a staff member arises that you feel has not been resolved, you can speak with the program manager. If you are not satisfied with the program manager's response, you may speak with our executive director. The agency's grievance policy is given during the intake process and it is also available in the office.
1. Advocates are available each day from ____ to _____. Advocates can help with problem solving, information, referral and support.

You have the right to self determination:

1. We are here to support you in making your own decisions. You have the right to manage your finances and set your own goals while you stay here.
2. Advocates can help you:
 - make safety plans for yourself and your children
 - clarify your goals while in shelter and create a plan to reach them
 - give you information about resources, programs, and your rights
 - support you in your parenting
 - help you pursue your own priorities.

Each family has the right to safety, privacy and to establish schedules that allow each member adequate rest, peaceful time and time to complete schoolwork as well as family obligations.

1. All residents are expected to respect the comfort and peace of other residents. Please keep noise levels to a minimum between 10:00pm and 8:00am.
2. All residents are required to attend the house meeting, held twice a week on ____ and _____ from ___ to _____. *(note: time should be after children are in bed or childcare should be provided.)* This meeting is where most of the challenges of living in a communal household are worked out. Coming to the meeting ensures that your point of view will be taken into consideration as residents identify problems and figure out how to solve them. *[note: that some programs have found that providing individual coaching and mediation for problems as they occur is more effective than requiring a house meeting; if house meetings aren't working, this is an alternative to consider and would allow your program to eliminate a rule.]*

You have the right to be supported in your role as a parent

1. Staff and volunteers of the Shelter Program will ask your permission before caring for your children or providing them food or medicine. We want your children to understand that you, not we, are watching out for them and meeting their needs.
2. You may make babysitting arrangements with other women. Please complete a babysitting agreement and give it to staff so that we know who is in charge of your children while you are away.
3. We want all children to be safe while they are here. **Children under 10 must be supervised by a responsible adult.** That adult must keep the children within earshot, on the same floor of the building, and be aware of what they are doing.
 - o Please be aware that children in the program may have been exposed to traumas which result in their acting out, sometimes against other children. For this reason, we ask you to be vigilant in supervising your children.

Every resident, including any children with you, has the right to live without the threat of violence.

1. Physical and verbal violence are not acceptable at the Shelter Program.
2. If you are having trouble parenting without using physical force or threats, please talk to your advocate. Your advocate and the children's advocate can help you create a plan for parenting that is effective and non-violent.
3. No weapons are allowed in building.
4. Any illegal activity on the property will jeopardize your ability to stay here.

Every resident has the right to a healthy, sober and drug free environment

1. Some women in our program struggle with chemical dependency issues. We are here to support them in their recovery.
2. Alcohol and illegal drugs are not permitted on the premises of the shelter.
3. Residents with histories of substance abuse are responsible for working with the staff to develop a plan for remaining sober. Staff will support recovering residents in a non-judgmental, respectful manner. Please let us know if what kind of support you may need to maintain or reclaim your sobriety.

Every resident has the right a clean and physically safe environment

1. Residents are asked to maintain their rooms in a manner that is sanitary, safe for children and considerate of future residents.
2. Residents are asked to clean up after themselves in the kitchen and bathrooms, and to do a chore daily to help keep the shelter clean.
3. Smoking is not allowed in the shelter. Smoking is allowed in _____.
4. Please keep your medications locked up in your locker and ensure that no child has access to the bottles or individual pills.

Every resident has the right to keep their presence at Our Program confidential.

1. If an abuser finds out the location of the shelter, it could compromise the safety of all residents. If your abuser comes to the building, you may need to find other living arrangements.
2. We would like to keep the street address of shelter as confidential as possible. For this reason, no mail will be delivered to the building, but will instead go to the agency's address: _____ Please include your name.
3. Please inform the staff of any suspicious cars or people around the property that you notice. Please call 911 if you observe prowlers or otherwise feel in danger.
4. Please do not reveal to anyone who is staying in the shelter.
5. Please be aware of our security system: (describe - alarms, remote cameras, systems for getting in, etc.)

You have the right to reside in a program that works for you.

1. If the Shelter Program does not work for you, your advocate can help you find alternative housing that will better suit your needs.
2. Every day, the Shelter Program must tell women in dangerous situations that the Shelter is full. If you demonstrate that you have alternative housing by being away from the shelter for more than 72 hours without contacting the Shelter Program, we will pack up your belongings and allow someone else to use the space.
3. Please check in with staff in person every 24 hours. This helps us make sure we are supporting you in achieving your goals. You can skip check-in twice a week.

The Shelter Program may ask you to leave if any of the following occur:

1. Violence or threats of violence towards staff or other residents.
2. Bringing alcohol or illegal drugs into the shelter.
3. Breaking another resident's confidentiality.
4. Bringing your abuser to the shelter.

If you are having trouble with the *other* responsibilities that relate to communal living, staff will work with you individually and in house-meetings to create a plan that works for you and facilitates harmonious group living.

Recommendations Regarding Warning and Exit Policies

- Remember: when a woman breaks a rule or has trouble adhering to the guidelines for communal living, it is an excellent opportunity to find out what her REAL needs are and to address them through discussion and Advocacy Based Counseling.
- Before giving a warning or asking someone to leave, staff should thoroughly assess for good communication of expectations well prior to the “last straw” and for effective advocacy beforehand; in other words, the agency should take responsibility for helping the woman succeed.
- DV programs should always come from a place of trying to make a situation work versus being anxious to move someone out of the program.
- The program should always make thorough efforts to ensure that women have been able to fully understand expectations and that they have had ample opportunity to express their needs. Particular care should be taken to ensure understanding and communication when women have limited English speaking capacity.
- At least two and preferably three or more people should be involved in any decision around exiting a woman.
- Women and children’s safety should be taken into consideration when a woman is being asked to leave. If possible, residents should be asked to leave during the daytime and advocates should work to help the resident find another safe place to go.
- Exit and warning processes should:
 - move as slowly as possible while maintaining safety
 - allow time for careful thought and discussion amongst staff
 - ensure that the resident has had the opportunity to respond to the warning and staff has time to consider that response.

Making Minimal Rules Work

1. Rules should have a clear connection to agency's mission and core values¹

- a) The shelter program has a clearly articulated mission and values. The Mission or values speak to the atmosphere staff hopes to create in the shelter, commitment to advocacy based counseling and aspirations regarding the nature of staff/resident relationships.
- b) The staff owns and articulates the mission and values. Each person understands the mission and how it informs the atmosphere, the spirit in which actions are taken and decisions are made.
- c) Staff being hired understand and make a commitment to the mission and core values. The agency/program mission and values shape the application process and interviews include a values screen which will identify fit and comfort with the agency's mission and core values.
- d) Ongoing in-service trainings address not only tasks but also the mission and core values of the program, and ways staff can embody these in all their actions.

2. Routine Reflection and Reevaluation

- a) Staff have time for self reflection as a regular part of the year: staff retreats and designated time to evaluate program policies including rules and their relationship to the program's mission. (see the Critical Questions To Ask Regarding Rules handout.)
- b) The program implements a regular feedback loop for women who have used the program to express freely what they found supportive and what they found unhelpful. Leadership has a commitment to make use of this feedback to help keep programs on track with the needs and thoughts of the people using the program.
 - This can be on exit forms, or programs can create a former residents advisory council.

3. Healthy Staff Working Conditions

- a) Tone set by supervisors is critical. Supervisors model a commitment to trying to make the program work for each resident, staying flexible, trying lots of alternatives, learning, and maintaining a compassionate and nonjudgmental point of view.
- b) Staff has emotional support, access to training, time to do some work outside the shelter in the community and wages that enable good self care. These all work to help staff keep in touch with the "big picture" and work positively with women.

¹ This section is adapted from Margaret Leonard's essay "Reflections on Shelter Rules" in *Parenting in Public* by Donna Haig Friedman (Columbia University Press, 2000), pages 152-156

4. Seeing the residents and staff as equally part of a community engaged together in learning how to live with one another

- a) Maintaining humility about our capacity to know what will make the shelter work for the families in it; realizing we can learn from residents when we listen to them.
- b) Engaging residents, sharing with them the spirit and intent of rules and being open to their articulation of what makes communal living work well for them; realizing that this will change as the group changes.
- c) Highly functional and well facilitated house meetings create a space for residents to articulate their hopes and expectations for the living environment, and to get support for problem solving.

5. Good collaborations with other providers in the community and expertise on staff

- a) Staff clarity regarding resources and options for residents within the community.
- b) The agency builds strong collaborations with community providers who can provide assistance and consultation when residents have mental health, substance abuse or other issues which make communal living a challenge.
- c) Routine work with parents includes processes to plan for children's needs, particularly when substance abuse is an issue. If staff knows who to call or where children should go if the mother needs treatment or disappears, this can alleviate anxieties and facilitate the program's flexibility in responding to the needs of the individual resident.
- d) Chemical dependency expertise on staff to provide support to women in recovery; get women and the program generally connected to resources, and to provide consultation to staff.

6. Clear communication with the Resident

- a) Assess resident's readiness to get information with the first few days; tell them when they are ready (they may not be ready to hear about all the rules in detail and remember them when they first arrive).
- b) Realize people can only take in so much information at one time. Residents may not fully take in or read the information we give them about rules and how the house runs. Therefore, the response to breaking rules or behavior that does not harmonize with group living should come from a place of understanding that women need reminding or information and should not assume that women are willfully and knowingly breaking rules.
- c) Routine practices should ensure that literacy and language access are not barriers to understanding how the program works. Rules must be read or explained verbally, and translated both verbally and in written form. When staff cannot communicate with residents in their primary language, discussions about rules and communal living should take place with interpretation.
- d) Frame problems in terms of fit with the program instead of personal failure; staff should avoid judging women in their conversations with residents and with each other.

Critical Questions to Ask About Shelter Rules

1. Why do we have this rule?
 - Is it a WAC Requirement?
 - Is it a Health Dept. Requirement?
 - Is it a requirement by another funder?
 - Is it related to a collaborative agreement with another agency?
2. Are the concerns this rule reflects still relevant?
3. Does this rule mirror the abuser's control?
4. Can we address this issue less punitively or without a rule?
5. Is this about staff time management—does it provide a shortcut from complex advocacy or uncomfortable conversations?
6. Do these rules (and the need to enforce them) create the kind of environment we want to create?
7. Does this rule actually accomplish its purpose? For example, does it actually create safety or just an illusion of safety?
8. Is the rule more controlling than basic social norms and accountability would be outside the program?
9. Would we really make a woman leave over violation(s) of this rule? (if not, it probably should not be treated as a rule and instead should be treated as guideline for communal living.)
10. Does this rule undermine mothers' authority in the eyes of their children? Does it allow mothers to be the primary person who meets children's needs, sets limits, and determines what their children will be doing?
11. Is the risk that someone would very occasionally engage in the behavior addressed in the rule worth the cost of subjecting all the residents to the rule all the time?
12. Is the rule burdensome to residents? Or to a particular group of residents? For example, disabled women, women with Limited English capacity, women with or without kids?
13. Does the rule foster mutual accountability between staff and residents for creating a safe and comfortable home for the residents and accomplishing the program mission?
14. Does this rule reflect an advocacy approach to problem solving? Does it interfere with or support women's independent decision making?
1. Is this rule consistent with our mission and core values regarding our shelter work?