

Rethinking Punitive Approaches to Shelter

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AGAINST DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

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YWCA SafeChoice Domestic Violence Program

When I first started working as a volunteer in a shelter, it did not take long for me to begin feeling like there was something wrong there. I observed the difficulty the women living in the shelter had in following the strict rules with severe consequences that quickly had them ejected from the program for non-compliance.

For example, I recall a particular participant whose experience in the program illustrated the punitive and rigid nature of our rules. When she arrived at the shelter, staff assigned this mother of three assigned a daily chore which she was required to complete by 9 am each morning. The timing of the chore interfered with her children's needs of getting dressed, fed, and off to school. When she chose to take care of her children and not do the chore, she received a warning, with no chance for explanations or compassion regarding the conflict the woman was trying to manage. That same woman and her children were at the grocery store late one evening, and their car would not start. The woman frantically asked for help and finally found someone to jumpstart the engine, but she returned after the 10pm curfew. The advocate on duty had already issued a written warning for curfew violation. The process did not allow any consideration of extenuating circumstances. Four days after entering shelter, this woman and her children found themselves evicted for non-compliance with the rules. This just didn't make sense to me.

Being a newly self-identified survivor of domestic violence impacted my perspective. All I knew was that I would never have been able to live in this shelter with my four children. There were too many rules. After all, I had just separated from my abuser who was far too controlling towards me to want to move into a shelter with staff members who would take on that role in my life.

In my role as a volunteer and later, as staff at this program, I wanted to create a warm, safe, and empowering environment in the shelter for the women and children to live in. I wanted them to be able to focus on their personal needs - set goals and achieve

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them -- and heal from the violence and trauma they had endured at the hands of their abuser and society, in general. But I found that the practice in the shelter program did not match up with the program's stated ideals and goals. The program had a strong Statement of Purpose for the Shelter which spoke to the program's desire to support women's autonomy and empower them. It included these goals:

- o Provide safe, supportive, non-violent, non-judgmental shelter, and included advocacy based counseling and referral services for women and children affected by domestic violence.
- o Recognize the right of everyone to make their own choices and decisions.
- o Provide services which will empower participants with skills for evaluating and making choices.

But bringing these values into day to day interactions and policy decisions with battered women was clearly a challenge.

The punitive, coercive rules oriented approach to sheltering domestic violence survivors caused me many sleepless nights. It has been a long journey since my first volunteer shift in 1994, but I decided to stick with it, to find a way to work within the domestic violence program to affect necessary change on the behalf of the survivors of domestic violence.

The Challenges of Making and Sustaining Change

When I became the Shelter Manager, I was in a position to make the changes I had dreamed of so many years ago! Fortunately, my vision and the program director's were in line with one another; we wanted to move in the same direction towards a less punitive, more empowering structure. In thinking about reforming the program's rules and policies, we were inspired by a training in which the instructor kept re-focusing the discussion by asking, "Is this survivor-centered?" and encouraged directors to reflect on the impact their decisions would have on the survivors using the

program. We began to apply this question to all new ideas and requests for changes in curriculum and program services.

Gaining staff trust, presenting new ideas, and persuading the staff members to come along for the ride and give a less punitive rule structure a chance proved to be a challenge. We found that change does not come easily. All the advocates were passionate about their work. However, that does not mean it is easy to come to consensus regarding new ideas and policy/practice changes. Staff members were frequently divided on in the implementation of new policies and practices. As a supervisor, I struggled with wanting to hear and validate all staff members' concerns while still remaining survivor-centered in our approach to delivering advocacy based services.

Throughout the process of reevaluating our rules and policies, I have drawn on the insights of authors, advocates, and activists such as Susan Schechter, Ellen Pence, Barbara Hart, Sara Buel, Beth E. Ritchie, Anne Ganley, Rev. Marie Fortune, Lenore Walker, Joan Zorza, Lydia Walker, Loretta Ross, and many, many more. These leaders of the Battered Women's Movement have broadened my perspective. Their collective viewpoints helped me go beyond my own personal experience as a point of reference and framed the experiences of other victim/survivors who accessed services from our YWCA SafeChoice Domestic Violence Program.

Identifying guiding principles and critical questions to ask about rules:

As a starting point, all program staff members as well as volunteers agreed that the survivors of domestic violence who come to our program and our shelter are intelligent and capable women who need a safe haven to live in while they work on their own personal goals and benefit from our offer of advocacy based counseling, support groups, and legal advocacy.

Starting from this premise, we began a process of re-evaluating our rules, starting with those that seemed

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the most punitive and controlling.

We asked these questions about each rule:

- o Does this rule come from the WAC requirements?
- o Is this a rule based on Vancouver Housing Authority contracts (they own our building)?
- o Is this a Health Department requirement?
- o Is this a Fire Department requirement?
- o Is this a Labor and Industry requirement?
- o Is this a Food Bank requirement?
- o Is this rule based on agreements reached with our Coordinated Response partners?
- o Do we have this rule because it makes the staff's job easier?
- o Does this rule make the lives of the women and children easier?
- o Is this a rule that promotes safety of the women and children living here?
- o Is this a reactive rule? Are the origins of this rule based on one negative incident that we hope to prevent from happening again?
- o Is this a proactive rule? Have we carefully and intentionally thought out a situation, in advance, and devised a rule that will work in the best interests of the women and children living in this shelter?
- o Can we live without the rule?

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We eliminated some of the most outrageous rules as soon as we could. Some of the first rules to go were:

- o Everyone must wear shoes at all times when out of their bedrooms, including children (even at night going to the bathroom)
- o Everyone must be up by 9 am and dressed, ready to go about their business
- o Women and children cannot go into any one else's room, for any reason

- o Weekly room inspections for cleanliness
- o Giving “House” Warnings to everyone, whether they were involved or not. (For example, if a common room was found to be disorderly)

Revising and eliminating rules has been an ongoing process. Most rule changes start with casual discussions outside of formal meetings, and move from there onto the agenda of staff meetings. In some cases, the program director and I have simply made a decision to modify or clarify a rule. In general, the staff has come to agree that “less is more” when it comes to rules for communal living.

As part of rethinking how our work could better reflect our program’s values, we didn’t just get rid of rules. We also revised old policies and created new, more empowering policies. For example:

- o We adapted our “zero tolerance for drug and alcohol use” in our shelter, based on information and trainings led by Patty Bland, and the coalition’s model protocol for responding to substance abuse. We began providing a support group focus on the connection between domestic violence and chemical dependency.
- o We came up with a plan for the women to be able to spend the night away from the shelter, one night a week, without losing their bed space or punitive action from staff.
- o We also looked at our “consequence system” of warnings and violations and developed a more respectful, mutually accountable method for this process which allows for more dialogue amongst staff and between staff and the participant.

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Enforcing rules with dialogue and compassion

Between 2002 and 2006, we increased the standard length of shelter stay from 30 to 45 and finally 60 days. With the increase in length of stay, we needed to rethink our system of consequences for rule violations

Our new process allows for more dialogue and mutual accountability between participants and staff

and how many a woman could have before being required to leave the program. We decided to devise a process that would give women a chance to respond to Warnings, asking us to re-consider based upon the extenuating circumstances or giving us additional information about why they were not able to follow the rule. Our new process allows for more dialogue and mutual accountability between participants and staff and slows down the process, allowing staff more time for information sharing and thoughtful consideration. It also creates a process for us to take into account individual situations instead of rigidly enforcing rules regardless of the circumstances.

Before writing a warning, advocates should speak with the participant about the situation directly. Once the advocate has had talked with the participant, she has two options:

- Don't write up a warning: through advocacy based counseling or explanation, advocates sometimes find the need for a warning has disappeared.
- Write up the warning. Our policy emphasizes collaboration and discussion between staff, warnings must be written by two advocates. We also emphasize dealing with problems right away and not passing them onto the next shift. So our policy requires that warnings *must be written on the shift of the advocate who notices the problem*. If it isn't written up during that shift, the participant gets a 'freebie' - staff must "let it go."

After getting a written warning describing the problem, the participant has the opportunity to sign the warning and/or respond in writing. If she signs the warning, then this is an acknowledgment that she is in agreement about what happened. Then the warning is noted in her file and the detailed description of the problem is shredded.

If the participant responds to the Warning, then staff have 72 hours (3 days - from the time she responded) to consider her response, which is placed in the log book, which everyone reads. Advocates then give their

input by writing on the form if they think the warning should 'Stand' or be 'Voided'. After the 72 hour time period, the majority opinion of staff members is applied. If most of the staff think the warning was unwarranted, the explanation the woman provided made sense, then the warning is voided - it is as if it never happened. The participant is notified of the team's decision. We find this policy slows down the process, helps take some of the drama and urgency out of these decisions, and allows for thoughtful and compassionate consideration. Importantly, it also allows staff time to continue providing advocacy and support to the participant.

When the possibility or necessity of eviction comes up, either because the woman has accumulated so many warnings or because of safety issues, the advocate on duty discusses the situation with co-workers, either in person or via phone. Our policy requires a minimum of three staff members to be in agreement and listed on the Eviction form. We also emphasize talking with the participant **before** making a decision to write an Eviction (or warning) form, in order to keep dialogue central in the process. Sometimes we find eviction is not necessary.

Less is More

We have all worked hard together to create a more supportive environment for the women and children living in the shelter. The changes we have made had an immediate and positive impact on all - both program participants and staff members. The participants felt like they had a right to make their own decisions and the staff felt less like wardens in a jail.

Now the women who live in our shelter can set their own goals, make their own decisions, and feel supported in doing so. Staff can be a witness to the women's personal growth and successes. It is a win-win situation for all involved! We will continue our journey by continually examining our rules and

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practices, to make this the best, safest, shelter in Washington State, staffed with the best and most compassionate staff available. After all of our thinking about rules and practices, our staff members' and volunteers' commitment to serve the women and children living in our Shelter has been reaffirmed and deepened by the work and the compassion of everyone involved.

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