

## Critical Questions to Ask About Shelter Rules

1. Does this rule mirror the abuser's control?
2. What problem are we trying to solve with this rule? Is this the least burdensome way to address this issue?
3. Is this rule consistent with our mission and core values regarding our shelter work?
4. Does this rule shut down opportunities for conversation or safety planning with residents? Would it be better to invite conversation about the issue rather than threaten consequences? (For example, forbidding residents from contacting their batterer does not stop them from contacting their batterer, but it does stop them from benefitting from conversation and safety planning before doing so, and debriefing afterwards. Is that our goal?)
5. Are we asking/requiring residents to make up for a shortcoming in our building, funding or staff? Is there a way the organization can take responsibility for making things go well rather than putting that burden on residents?
6. If we think we have to have the rule because of the Administrative Code/Health Code/Fire Code, have we double checked lately? Is there a less oppressive way to meet requirements?
7. If the rule is related to funder's requirement, what is the exact wording of that requirement? Does the rule satisfy that requirement with the least impact possible on residents?
8. Are the concerns this rule reflects still relevant?
9. Can we address this issue less punitively or without a rule?
10. Is this about staff time management—does it provide a shortcut from complex advocacy or uncomfortable conversations?
11. Do these rules (and the need to enforce them) create the kind of environment we want to create?
12. Is it possible to enforce the rule? If not, what purpose does it serve?
13. Does this rule actually accomplish its purpose? For example, does it actually create safety or does it just create an illusion of safety?
14. Is the rule more controlling than basic social norms and accountability would be outside the program?
15. Would we really make a woman leave over violation(s) of this rule? (if not, it probably should be treated as guideline for communal living, not as a rule.)

16. 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?
17. 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?
18. Is the rule burdensome to residents? Or to a particular group of residents? For example, disabled survivors, residents with Limited English capacity, residents with or without kids?
19. 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?
20. Does this rule reflect a survivor centered advocacy approach to problem solving? Does it interfere with or support survivors' independent decision making?

### General Recommendations Regarding Shelter Rules and Policies

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

All the written material a program gives residents, including rules/guidelines/program policies should 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 residents 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 resident leave over it, it should not be in the rules.

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

*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 residents a safe place to lock up their valuables. If parents are required to keep children in sight, ensure that a safe play area is visible from the kitchen, so parents 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?

## About 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 residents 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 survivors have limited English speaking capacity.
- At least two and preferably three or more people should be involved in any decision around exiting a woman.
- Survivors 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.