

# SECTION: SHELTER

## TOPIC TITLE: Exiting Clients

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### Importance of Topic:

The end of an individual's or family's stay at a domestic violence shelter can be a challenging time regardless of where they are heading. A survivor may find it necessary to exit shelter for several reasons. For example, they have found permanent housing and are leaving voluntarily, the time allotted for staying in the program has expired, they are returning to the home with the abusive partner, or the agency has requested that the individual leave. Each agency should have a specific protocol for transitioning individuals out of shelter, regardless of the reason, and try to be as supportive as possible during the exit process.

### Statutes/Professional Standards:

- Code of Virginia Reference: None
- [Professional Standards Reference](#): None

### Terms Used or Needed to Understand this Topic:

*Length of stay:* Total number of days allotted for survivors to remain in shelter. Some agencies use the same number for every person, some adjust based on the needs of the survivor and/or their family, and some have no defined maximum number of days.

*Involuntary exit:* A client has been asked to leave the shelter before the agreed upon exit date due to a real or perceived violation of shelter expectations.

### Did You Know?

VAdata records indicate that in 2019 one-third of survivors leaving shelter were headed toward stable housing (self-supported or transitional housing with the abuser not present).

A transition strategy with safety planning is a trauma-informed strategy for exiting clients.

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## **Racial/Social Justice Focus:**

Determinations about length of stay extensions or involuntary exits can be influenced by implicit bias and different forms of oppression like racism, ableism, and homophobia. Agencies have policies regarding length of stay and exit criteria, but there is often flexibility within the most clear and consistent criteria when staff are making exit decisions. This flexibility can create inconsistencies in the outcomes for marginalized survivors and negatively impact survivors who are most at risk for homelessness and re-traumatization.

*Scenario 1:* Zameer came to the emergency shelter after her husband threatened to hurt her baby. Zameer had experienced years of abuse and felt like there was very little hope for an immigrant woman in this country, but she could not imagine keeping her child in this much danger. After a brief intake process, Zameer was led to a room with a locking door and she and her baby finally felt safe. She slept long hours just like her child, found it difficult to contribute to chores while keeping her baby fed and happy, and didn't really feel comfortable attending the support group sessions. Zameer struggled to make eye contact with her counselors and spoke so softly it was barely audible. The counselors struggled to work with her and didn't know if she fully understood what was expected of her. Susan entered the shelter around the same time as Zameer. Susan had two young children with her and very few belongings. She attended the support group every week and quickly identified some achievable goals to work toward with the help of her case manager. Both women were told that there was a 45 day limit on their stay in the emergency shelter; however, when the final week neared, Susan's case manager worked to get her an extension so Susan could save up a little more money to get in her own apartment. Zameer's case manager was frustrated with Zameer's lack of progress, didn't work to get her an extension, and offered to identify a list of resources for Zameer to pursue after leaving the shelter. Susan was able to remain for an additional month while Zameer left the shelter after 45 days and moved into the garage of relatives unsure if they would commit to keeping her abuser away from the home.

- How might case managers and counselors interpret Zameer's response to being in shelter more broadly and find ways to support her progress in a way that is unique to Zameer's experience?
- Why do you think Susan was granted an extension while Zameer was not?

*Scenario 2:* Murphy came into the emergency shelter with two young children and no idea of what to do next. After a few meetings with her counselor, Murphy had set some very small yet attainable goals. Murphy appreciated the clear expectations laid out by her counselor about how long she could expect to live at the emergency shelter and what the process would be like for getting an extension to stay longer if she didn't feel ready and able to leave after 30 days. During her month in the shelter, she regularly attended support groups, but wasn't able to make much progress on her goals. As the 30 day mark neared, Murphy did not have a plan for where she and her children would go. Her case manager went over all the available community resources with her and they were able to map out a plan to get her into the transitional housing program, but she would need a little more time in the shelter to make that work. Her extension was granted after staff met to discuss her progress and realized how to best help her achieve her goals. When the time came to finally move on from the shelter, she was offered many community resources and the continued scope of services offered by staff at the domestic violence program. Murphy felt confident in her future and felt supported by the staff.

- How might your agency be able to support individuals with unique needs meet their goals on a timeline that is manageable for the survivor and the program?
- How can clear expectations around length of stay and extension protocols help survivors make informed decisions and create fewer opportunities for biased decision-making?

### **Trauma-informed Focus:**

Exiting shelter can be experienced as the loss of a relationship and can be traumatic for some survivors. It is essential to validate the survivor's feelings even if anger or ambivalence is present. Some survivors may be upset because things didn't work out as they'd imagined and others may be grieving the loss of security and stability. Even survivors who are transitioning to stable housing may need extra support when leaving the emergency shelter. Regardless, staff can use the exit process to check in with survivors and offer support and resources while acknowledging the individual's strengths and accomplishments.

## Promising Practices:

### *Overview of General Characteristics:*

- The agency has clearly identified length of stay determination policies, including the process for extension requests if applicable.
- Prior to exiting, regardless of the reason, staff offers to explore alternative accommodations or other housing resources, conduct safety planning, make referrals to various community resources, and assist the individual during the transition while offering follow-up services.
- Individuals are allowed to terminate their stay at the shelter at any time without consequence. Should they need to return to the shelter in the future, readmission decisions are made based on current circumstances and need.
- A minimum of 2 staff are involved in the process to make an exit determination. During COVID-19 or with other medical issues, consider adding additional staff to this process or providing extensions.

### *Examples:*

- **Clinch Valley Community Action Agency** (Tazewell) offers a flexible length of stay policy based on individual need and available resources. Individuals may be involuntarily exited due to physical violence towards staff or other survivors. Regardless of the reason for exiting shelter, individuals are assessed on their current situation for readmission and their prior experiences are not held against them.
- **Artemis House** in Fairfax County is the only emergency shelter in the county. Artemis House, a program of Shelter House, has two main locations for shelter housing. As with most programs, they have had to limit the number of people sheltered due to COVID. Their program is for 45 days; however the emphasis is on getting housing, so clients may have the option to obtain an extension in the program. Their average stay prior to COVID was about 67 days; now it has increased by about 50%. A housing plan is developed early with the case manager to help the survivor. Exit decisions are made by more than one staff member and will include

either the assistant director and/or director of the shelter. A transition plan is made for each client exit. Early exit decisions are made if there are safety concerns for others, including staff and other residents. If there is a difficult exit, there is support from other staff and discussion about the decision. Shelter House has a strong community partnership with the Office to Prevent and End Homelessness and can work with staff there for coordinated service planning with shelter exits.

*Program Focus:*

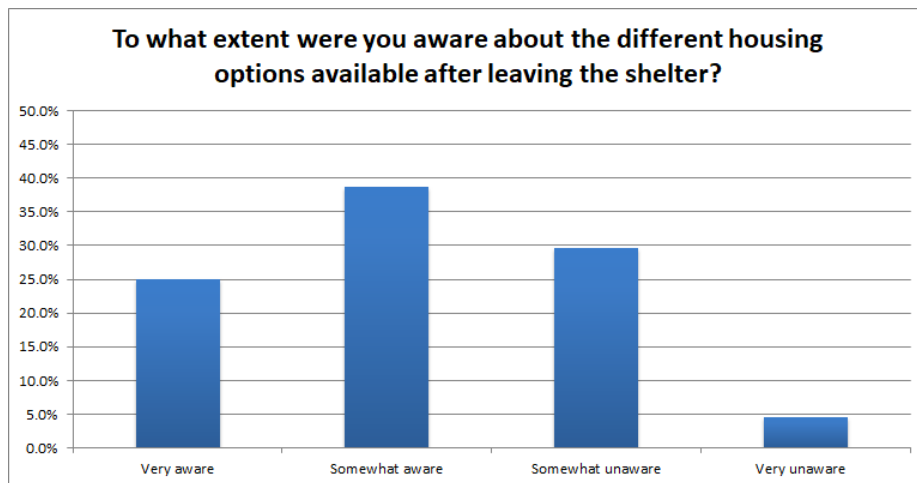
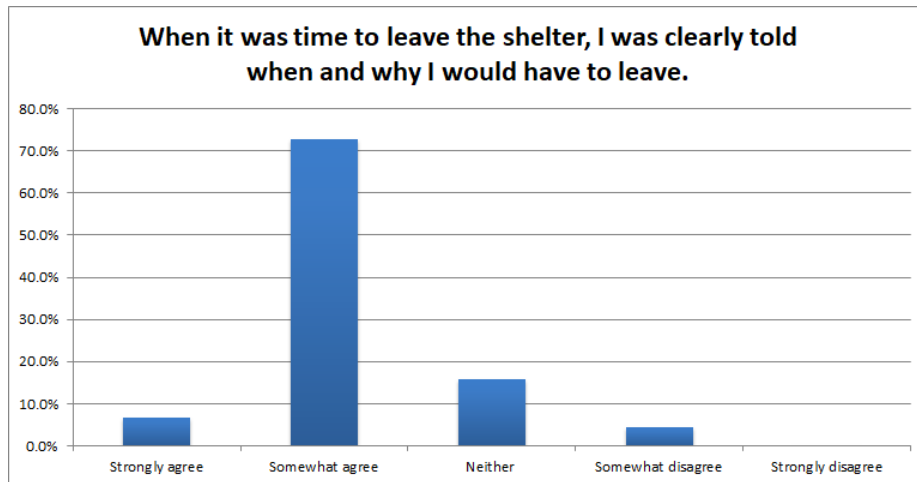
- Are length of stay and exit expectations clearly articulated for all staff and program participants?
- Are the reasons a survivor would be asked to leave involuntarily limited to health and safety issues only? Are there any other ways to address violating health and safety expectations without asking someone to leave the shelter?
- Do staff have the opportunity to process end of stay determinations with supervisors and/or other case managers with experience working with a particular survivor?
- Is safety planning a part of **every** transition plan?

*Survivor voice:*

Documenting Our Work Evidence

- "I am leaving here with stronger emotion. I know more about the community connections."
- "My main concern are not at this time with the shelter. they are mainly what my safety will be after I exit!"
- "staff so gun no about chores and meetings but less concerned about supplying jobs no transportation and ready to exit you out"
- "constant exit date stress"
- "I would like to have each resident to be told on the first/second day when their exit date is so they can plan better!"

- “The fact that if you have no where to go once your exit date arrives, they just put you out like trash on the curb!”
- “Staff seemed like they cared for a while and then just exited me without reason or care of where I was going or anything else.”
- “Maybe include a calendar with key dates i.e. entrance, exit date, last date to submit extension.”
- “I believe the only thing that could be better would be to let people stay until they are financially able to get on their own instead of having exit dates.”



Data from Survivor Voice Survey, 2021

## Family Plans At Time Of Shelter Exit

Stable Housing = Self-Supported or Transitional Housing  
Unstable Housing = Residence of friend/relative, other shelter, left area



### VAdata 2019 Services Report

#### COVID-19 Focus:

Exiting shelter should not be a consequence of contracting COVID-19. Just like before the pandemic, survivors should be supported in the process of exiting the shelter safely. Although shelter capacity has been limited, agencies should not attempt to reduce the length of stay for survivors to try and accommodate more individuals. The exit process takes time and is critical to ensuring survivors' wellbeing. Additional guidance may be needed since the community services survivors regularly access when leaving may have gone virtual, and advocates will need to ensure survivors can still access these resources. Extra emotional support may also be needed since survivors are exiting into more instability than before the pandemic. Survivors who test positive for COVID-19 may need to extend their stay in order to quarantine for two weeks before moving in with a family member or to transitional housing.

#### *During COVID-19:*

- How will your agency manage the balance between an increased request for services and making sure that each client is able to receive a fair exiting process?
- If using hotel rooms for clients, how does that impact your agency exit strategy?
- How will your agency connect clients to community agencies which may have moved to virtual services?

#### *COVID-19 Examples:*

- Programs have been as flexible as possible about length of stay and have granted extensions when they can.

- Shelter staff are considering health issues for survivors and whether they will be exiting to a safe environment in regards to the pandemic.

### **Additional Resources + Links:**

#### *Publications:*

- [Critical Questions to Ask about Shelter Rules](#) - under the heading “About Warning and Exit Policies”, a few key points to consider when planning for an involuntary exit of a survivor.
- [BEST PRACTICES MANUAL](#) Best Practices Model for DV Programs, Arizona Coalition Against Domestic Violence, pages 43-36. While this is an older publication (June 2000) and practices have changed since then, the section on Termination of Services and Follow-Up offers good guidance.