

SECTION: SHELTER

TOPIC TITLE: Shelter Design



Importance of Topic:

Survivors deserve to live with dignity while staying in a shelter. The physical layout, look, and feel of a shelter directly impacts the experience of survivors and staff. Meeting the needs of survivors and their children through thoughtful design strategies enhances accessibility, makes parenting easier, and minimizes conflicts between residents. Shelter site location and outdoor environments are also important to consider when exploring shelter design concepts and strategies.

Statutes/Professional Standards:

- Code of Virginia Reference: None
- [Professional Standards Reference](#): None
- ADA Standards for Accessible Design: [Information and technical assistance](#)
- While local ordinances may differ in locality, connecting with your local fire department, planning department, and building department to best understand building and construction codes would be a beneficial step at the beginning of shelter design planning or renovation.

Terms Used or Needed to Understand this Topic:

Shelter design: Considering the impact of the built environment of a domestic violence shelter and/or place where a survivor is being housed on the dignity, safety, and autonomy of the survivors accessing shelter services.

Did You Know?

Making small changes focused on comfort or flow of space and sight lines can have a big impact for individuals staying at the shelter. Not every remedy will require a build out or professional architectural guidance.

Racial/Social Justice Focus:

The built environment, location, and aesthetic design of a domestic violence shelter can promote well-being and comfort for survivors and advocates working at the shelter.

Considerations for how a shelter space can decrease barriers of ableism for survivors is especially important - are all residents able to independently prepare their own foods in the kitchen? Can the laundry facilities be accessed and used easily for those with mobility issues? The balance and flow of private to common areas and visible throughways are considerations that can create opportunities for diverse survivors to engage in meaningful programming while building relationships and caring for children.

Scenario 1: LoveHouse Shelter is located in a donated space that was once a two-story, three-bedroom home. After struggling for many years to adequately meet the needs of individuals and families within the structure of the shelter, they decided to do some intentional reflection and worked with a local architecture firm. The firm provided its services pro bono and all staff and a small group of survivors were invited to provide feedback throughout the process. The team made some small changes to enhance the flow of space and create flexibility in the common areas. They moved the children's play area within eyesight of the kitchen. LoveHouse Shelter drafted long range plans to purchase the adjacent home which could offer bedrooms on the first floor, increase accessibility for differently abled survivors, and make more private rooms available.

- How did this program adapt its physical space to meet the needs of survivors?
- What benefits could be gained from including staff and survivors in the shelter design reflection process?

Scenario 2: Amelia Project was looking for a new building to house their emergency shelter. The Board of Directors was nervous about having the building located in a very public space for fear that it wouldn't be properly secured. They found a spot far off the beaten path and felt it would be perfect for a confidential shelter location. The building was a two story house with all bedrooms on the second floor, space for one washer and dryer, and a small kitchen. The room available for a staff office is fairly small. There would be limited sight lines for parents to keep an eye on their children inside the building, and there was a large backyard with a 10 foot privacy fence. A convenience store and bus stop is about 3.5 miles away, where travel paths would not include a sidewalk.

- How could prioritizing security above all else be detrimental to the needs of survivors in emergency shelter?
- If Amelia Project moved into this space what are some issues that might emerge once the house was inhabited by several survivors and their families?
- How would an isolated shelter impact a survivor who uses a wheelchair? A survivor that has no car or license?

Trauma-informed Focus:

While physical and psychological safety are common in a trauma-informed environment, the design and flow of a domestic violence shelter can contribute to increased peer support and trust and collaboration between advocates and survivors. Comfortable common areas encourage ongoing relationship building while private spaces support autonomy and dignity. Efforts to maximize comfort and safety can aid in reducing re-traumatization. Including wall paint colors that are considered soothing and inviting, as well as finding furniture that is comfortable, appealing to sit on, and still resistant to multiple-use is ideal. When considering shelter design, considerations of staff must also be included instead of an afterthought. Considerations for trauma-informed staff space layouts can contribute to enhancing the overall well-being of agency staff - does the staff space support harmonious advocate/resident interactions?

Promising Practices:

Overview of General Characteristics:

- Visual access throughout the shelter allows parents to maintain lines of sight with children while engaging in various activities and supports choice when individuals are deciding whether or not to enter a particular space.
- When determining location of new shelter sites, staff consider proximity to resources that support survivor independence.
- Safety and security measures reflect the survivors' needs for privacy and are not used for monitoring individual behavior within the shelter. If there is visual monitoring, externally or internally, what is being monitored? Are the cameras casting an image or recording? What liabilities could this open up?
- Considerations for the shelter's electrical and water needs are made, with optimal internet access and charging outlets. Additional assessment of lead and asbestos concerns are made early in the building process.
- Code locks are available in communal and/or private room doors to support survivor autonomy and privacy, while maintaining internal safety.
- Additional private spaces are available for use throughout shelter for prayer, lactation, and general "quiet room" needs.

Examples:

- Safe and secure, but not secret, is how **Project Horizon** (Lexington) describes its location which is one block off Main Street near a variety of essential services in a publicly known location. The location, design, and expansion of the shelter have been guided by the needs of survivors and dreams of staff. All offices and residential facilities are in one location with survivors' spaces separated from counselor and administrative spaces to make the shelter feel more like a home. The shelter has private bedrooms for individuals and families and one efficiency apartment to accommodate survivors for whom communal living would be most challenging. During recent renovations, the program was able to build out spaces for people to engage in different ways without having to spend so much time in their rooms. This included the addition of a play area, community space, enhanced kitchen and dining areas with refrigerator and pantry storage assigned to each bedroom, and a quiet

room. The Therapeutic Services Team uses the on-site Creative Arts Center to explore the healing power of music, eco-therapy, art, drumming, and weaving. Being able to provide such an array of services in one location while being near community resources has a positive impact on survivors. As of spring 2020, renovations are underway to develop an adjacent building into a Children's Counseling Center to accommodate the needs of children in an environment tailored to their experiences.

- When **Empowerhouse** (Fredericksburg) began exploring the purchase of a new shelter space, they made a criteria matrix and kept values of survivor privacy and independence front and center throughout the nearly ten years it took to move from idea to project completion. Their process involved receiving feedback from survivors, reflecting on Documenting Our Work data, and visiting several other shelters across Virginia to see the many ways other programs were making their shelters work. Empowerhouse relied heavily on the Building Dignity website for guidance and landed on a commercial space that could be transformed into a 9 suite/15 bedroom shelter with plenty of room for laundry facilities and a large kitchen with three prep areas. The new space is all on one floor and is ADA compliant with one suite having additional resources to assist individuals with a spectrum of needs. All bedrooms and suites lock and there are lockers and food storage areas to ensure the security of survivors' belongings while in shelter. Empowerhouse worked with architects to ensure adequate sight lines so parents can access different resources in the shelter while monitoring their children and there are plenty of areas for private intimate conversations and large group gatherings. This shelter environment attempts to balance the health and security of the survivors and staff with the need for survivor privacy and autonomy. The Empowerhouse shelter is "hidden in plain sight" and survivors have easy access to public transportation, grocery stores, and other amenities. They no longer have to turn people away due to lack of space and they are able to serve men, transgender individuals, and people from different faiths and diverse cultural backgrounds under one roof with ease. Empowerhouse leadership took their time to find the right space and to build it out to meet the needs of their community. While a 10 year process may not be possible for everyone, it certainly helps to have a vision in mind and to be willing to take longer than expected to get close to what you want.

Program Focus:

- Are there sight lines throughout the building to aid parents in their ability to monitor their children while doing other activities?
- Have diverse accessibility needs been considered in the physical layout of the building?
- Are amenities that may support survivor autonomy within walking distance or easily accessed by public transportation? Think about grocery stores, other community services, and employment opportunities.
- Are the laundry and kitchen facilities able to efficiently serve the number of residents regularly living at the shelter? What can be done to maximize the productivity of those spaces?
- Are there areas for both small private conversations and large gatherings of people?
- Have the safety and security of the building been explored to include strategies that don't negatively impact the autonomy of survivors?
- Are there enough charging outlets for all residents in both private rooms and communal spaces?
- Is wifi password information openly displayed and/or available for residents who rely on wifi for their phone networks?

Survivor voice:

Documenting Our Work Evidence

- "I think more space is needed people are crowded. They have no personal space."
- "Provide a separate kitchen/TV area for mothers with small children (birth to age 8) so single women and mothers with older children have a separate area to cook, relax, watch TV without the constant noise/disturbances that small children playing, crawling, yelling and screaming bring."

COVID-19 Focus:

Communal shelter models may need to be changed to follow new social distance guidelines or new rules may need to be applied to keep shelter residents safe. Shelters can physically change the flow of people within communal spaces, increase cleaning procedures, and require individuals to wear masks in shared spaces. Alternatively, shelters may need to be relocated to scattered sites such as hotels, motels, or apartments to ensure the health and safety of survivors. These scattered sites should be well disinfected between individuals. Advocates may need to reconsider considerations of supporting shelter residents' children by providing virtual schooling spaces, with available desks and computers/tablets.

During COVID-19:

- How can your shelter spaces change their physical design to accommodate survivors in a safe way? What new precautions can you implement to protect survivors within the shelter environment?
- If your communal shelter model will not work for COVID-19, what other local housing options do you have to provide shelter to survivors?
- Does your shelter have a plan in place for housing survivors who are COVID-19 positive and need an individual space?
- Some survivors may feel particularly isolated in a hotel/alternative shelter space. What does engagement look like in this capacity?
- For survivors who have a history of strangulation or complex health complications, wearing a mask may be challenging. Can your program offer alternatives (ex. plastic shields) and discuss how the survivor can navigate their needs in the community during current mask protocols?

COVID-19 Examples:

- First Step (Harrisonburg) – As a result of COVID causing a need for reduced capacity in their shelter, First Step has used hotels to house survivors. Advocates have continued to work with these survivors. Although not as cost-effective as a single shelter building, the option to offer hotel space can help those survivors who might

find communal living to be overwhelming. Due to the added expense with hotels, First Step is uncertain if they will be able to continue this option after pandemic funding ends.

Additional Resources + Links:

Publications:

- [Building Dignity Website](#): Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence - website exploring various design strategies for domestic violence shelter spaces.
- [A Safe Place to Start Over: The Role of Design in Domestic Violence Shelters](#): Sarah M. Kesler - Kansas State University.
- [Use of Surveillance Cameras Inside Shelters Run by SVDAs](#): Action Alliance.
- [Tips on Managing Stress and Internal Upset Caused by Mask Wearing for Survivors of DV/SV](#): Ohio Domestic Violence Network.
- [National Association of Productivity and Organizing](#): resource based on locality.