

SECTION: SHELTER

TOPIC TITLE: Voluntary Services – Rights & Responsibilities



Importance of Topic:

The voluntary services model is based on the idea that a survivor's participation in any domestic violence services should be voluntary and not on a condition of receiving shelter or other services. This has also been referred to as the "reduced rules" or "rights and responsibilities" model. The voluntary services approach to providing domestic violence services is an empowerment-based, survivor-centered approach rather than a compliance-driven, service-centered approach. The voluntary services model is based on the belief that survivors are competent, capable, and should have the right to make their own decisions. When survivors are engaged in directing their care, they experience better outcomes - survivors thrive within the voluntary services model!

Statutes/Professional Standards:

- Code of Virginia Reference: None
 - [Professional Standards Reference](#): Standard #8 - SDVAs support voluntary services model and respect survivors' right to self-determination. *Written protocols and practices that support survivors' right to self-determination. Written protocol that informs all clients of their rights.*
 - Federal Code: Any grantee receiving funds through VAWA or FVPSA must demonstrate the use of the voluntary services model: [Family Violence Prevention and Services Act \(FVPSA\), 42 U.S.C. 10404\(a\)\(4\), as most recently amended by the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment \(CAPTA\) Reauthorization Act of 2010 \(Pub. L. 111-320\)](#). (Voluntary Services referenced in the last paragraph of pg. 1 of [Final Rule](#).)
 - Federal Code: Violence Against Women Act, Reauthorization of 2005, participation in services are voluntary and refusal to receive services shall not be grounds for termination from the program or eviction from the victim's housing, [VIOLENCE](#)
-

Terms Used or Needed to Understand this Topic:

Voluntary Services: The provision of emergency shelter and other domestic violence services must be voluntary and without conditions or requirements. For example, criminal background checks or sobriety requirements are not allowed as a shelter screening tool nor is it ok to require survivors to attend life skills classes, support groups, or counseling, do chores, or participate in other activities in order to receive shelter or any specific service they need. This takes into account each individual's unique circumstances and honors their personal power and decision-making. (Adapted from the FVPSA [Final Rule](#) and [Missouri Coalition - How the Earth Didn't Fly Into the Sun.](#))

Empowerment Model: In the empowerment model, survivors of domestic violence are the experts in their lives. This philosophy also might be referred to as survivor-defined advocacy. Those offering survivors assistance and help must encourage and respect the choices they make. Advocates should consciously reinforce the expectation that those who have experienced domestic violence can—and will—take charge of their own lives. (Adapted from [Missouri Coalition - How the Earth Didn't Fly Into the Sun](#) pg. 48.)

Self-Determination: "Those seeking services from an agency retain the right and responsibility to make decisions in their own best interest and in the best interest of any dependent family members without the interference or undue influence of advocates, except in cases where there is an immediate risk of harm to self or others" ([Professional Standards](#) Manual Glossary).

Did You Know?

Many shelter rules were created to respond to a single incident!

It is not uncommon for shelters to have residents who may hoard food or even toilet paper. This hoarding may be a trauma reaction, but can still provide challenges for shelter staff. Rather than creating a rule to address this, shelter staff can look at ways to resolve the situation with the resident or make a point to change a practice or rule that may have developed due to a single situation, for instance when the resident in question leaves the shelter.

Racial/Social Justice Focus:

People often think that shelter expectations are “race-neutral” but many advocates, particularly advocates of color and advocates who are from marginalized communities, acknowledge that systems have been created to serve the needs of predominantly white, able-bodied, heterosexual, cisgender, and temporarily poor women. Rights and responsibilities can have different consequences depending on the lived experiences of individual survivors. Unconscious or implicit bias leads advocates to make assumptions about survivors based on their identities.

Scenario 1: Sonja has been staying at Misty Mountain Shelter for two weeks. She has yet to attend a support group, but has been able to maintain the part-time job she had when she arrived at shelter even though she doesn't get off work until 2AM. Sonja is able to comply with the rights and responsibilities laid out for her during intake. Shelter advocates regularly offer opportunities for Sonja to access a variety of resources and she picks and chooses which options work best for her. Sonja feels like her case manager is on her side and believes that they can work together to meet her needs.

- How is this program using voluntary services to positively impact Sonja's experience?
- How does the program ensure that Sonja sees the advocates as partners?

Scenario 2: “Like many women at the shelter I was frequently written up for missing my curfew, not doing my chores ‘right,’ and ‘disrespectful communication’ for standing up for myself and refusing to comply with their unreasonable demands. This is how I ended up having panic attacks almost every day towards the end of my stay. These panic attacks in turn were used by staff to justify further write-ups and threats of eviction.” Akasha continues: “During my stay at the DV shelter I was unable to do sex work at all because of the curfew and other restrictions and fear of staff finding out. And my ‘straight’ job was also threatened by the demands placed on my time due to my weekly chores, which usually added up to about ten hours a week of cleaning and cooking during my regular work hours. This forced me to disclose to my boss that I was living in a shelter and obviously this compromised my job security (from [Disloyal to Feminism](#), Emi Koyama).

- How could having fewer rules around chores and curfew have made a difference for Akasha?
- If survivors all have unique lived experiences, how does a voluntary services model expand access to resources and services?

Trauma-informed Focus:

Requiring everyone who accesses shelter services to participate in all activities denies individuals the opportunity to make choices and perpetuates some of the same experiences of power and control that they were experiencing at the hands of an abusive partner. By seeing survivors as equal partners in their own advocacy work, ensuring staff have healthy working conditions and opportunities for routine reflection and re-evaluation of their processes, utilizing physical fixes whenever possible, and engaging in clear communication with survivors and community partners, domestic violence shelter staff are able to practice trauma-informed services with minimal rules.

Promising Practices:

Overview of General Characteristics:

- Programs regularly review policies related to rights and responsibilities in a collaborative process that relies on all staff and feedback from clients.
- It can be helpful to try to understand what the unmet need is when someone goes against program guidelines/does not meet the expectations set forth by shelter staff. Finding out what's really going on and working collaboratively to meet the need is more effective than doling out punishments.
- Staff are supported in their efforts to build a non-judgemental and compassionate relationship/partnership to help survivors thrive.
- Staff clearly communicate client rights and responsibilities and are engaged in efforts to find creative solutions to issues in the shelter.

- Programs offer a wide array of services at variable time slots to encourage participation and regularly receive feedback from survivors about services that could best meet their needs.

Examples:

- At the **Women’s Resource Center of the New River Valley** (Radford) shelter staff meet weekly to reflect on any challenges and celebrate any successes. This space is held for deeper and more collaborative conversations as a way to strategize on how to meet a particular need without relying on strict rules or compulsory participation in services. Supervisors provide regular and ongoing support for staff to reflect on their practices and make changes as needed. External training was extremely influential in the initial stages of transformation to a voluntary services model and staff believes continuing to receive training from state and national thought leaders would be beneficial for any DVP implementing a voluntary services model.
- The **Haven Shelter and Services** (Warsaw) has felt that staff have always been creative in meeting survivor needs due to their rural environment, and they utilize a team approach for managing cases with weekly meetings for staff to understand the unique situations of each survivor. Staff have seen a shift in the dynamics of support groups as the participants are more engaged when voluntarily accessing that resource. Staff tend to focus more on natural consequences and not imposing guidelines that move staff into the role of enforcer. Staff have also seen a shift in their ability to develop meaningful relationships with program participants when seen as allies working together with survivors versus that of an agency employee who may also be perpetrating power and control tactics onto shelter residents.

Program Focus:

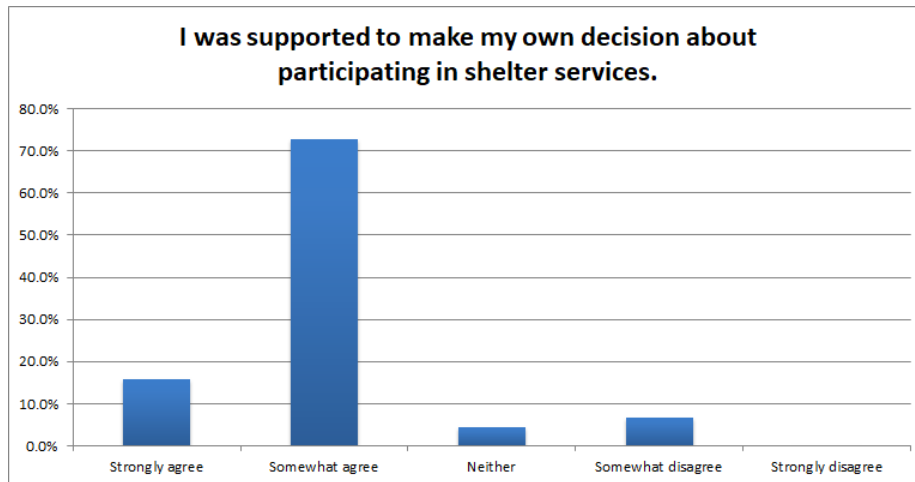
- How could your program seek input from survivors and/or shelter staff when creating, removing, or changing program expectations?
- How does your program take time to regularly reflect on existing rights and responsibilities of staff and survivors?

- Has your program considered if a particular program expectation is burdensome to specific groups of clients more so than others? For example, survivors with disabilities, survivors with limited-English proficiency, survivors who are LGBTQ, survivors with children, etc.
- How would your relationship with shelter residents be different if you did not have the responsibility of monitoring and enforcing program expectations?

Survivor voice:

Documenting Our Work Evidence

- "Work on extending curfew"
- "Make different rules for different people/situations."
- "I was here before + I like that the rules are less and I don't have to worry so much about [illegible] the rules."
- "I feel like some of the rules were unnecessary and I didn't like feeling like a child about some things"
- "I was hoping it would be more structured as far as chores, group sessions. For those of us who work during the day we miss all the classes by the time we get home @ 5pm. (by structured I mean making us go, I wanted to go to more Classes)"
- "Rules are very similar to an abusive relationship, transportation and safety while coming and going, being forced to leave when not ready to support self, child care, no financial assistance"



Data from Survivor Voice Survey, 2021

COVID-19 Focus:

The provision of emergency shelter and other domestic violence services must be voluntary and without conditions or requirements. Pandemics mean that provision of shelter and services may be contingent on being negative for symptoms of COVID-19 or proving that you have a negative COVID-19 test which could be used to deny services, however this is against statutes relating to voluntary services. Services cannot be withheld from survivors based on COVID-19 test status. Steps can be taken, though, to promote the best safety practices.

During COVID-19:

- Did your program have to enact any new eligibility requirements for people seeking shelter?
- How are you encouraging survivors to make their own choices and feel empowered in a time where many choices have been taken away?
- How have you worked with survivors to notify them of the changes that have been made and problem solve with survivors as issues related to COVID-19 come up?

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:

Videos:

- Comparison Between Survivor/Abuser and Survivor/Shelter relationships
 - Teresa and Joe: <https://youtu.be/jcDlGVDsFI>
 - Teresa and Shelter: <https://youtu.be/4uUxYudz--8>
- [Racism in the Anti-Violence Movement: Impacts on Survivors, Advocates, and Communities](#) (9:27): Futures Without Violence - Advocates share about what racism and oppression look like in shelter and how to think about the impact on survivors and staff.

Publications:

- [How the Earth Didn't Fly Into the Sun](#): Missouri Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence Project to Reduce Rules in Domestic Violence Shelters - summary of the coalition effort to work with local programs reflecting on their rules and learning how to reduce or eliminate them.
- [Model Policies for Shelter Rules](#): Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence - overview and general information about reduced rules model, sample policy, reflection questions for staff.
- [Moving from Rules to Rights and Responsibilities](#): WSCADV and Hickman House - description of how one program made the transition to a Rights and Responsibilities model with sample policies.