

## **Staffing of Domestic Violence Shelters**

### **OVERVIEW:**

Staffing configurations in domestic violence (DV) shelters throughout Colorado are as diverse as the state itself. Best practices in the field do not specify how DV shelters should or must be staffed, but rather focus on the fundamental principles of best practices in DV advocacy, appropriately translated into advocacy, safety, and services for people in shelter. Taking into account the variety of shelter conformations including size (numbers of beds/capacity), type and location of the facility, identification of its users (multiple function shelter or DV only), number of DV organization staff, type of community, level of shelter security, access to off-site staff and staff response time, organizational resources, etc., each DV organization must make its own determination on how best to use its limited resources in staffing its shelter. Some traditional shelters are redefining “shelter” as “access to safe housing” and looking at a number of ways to achieve that.

Staffing of shelters ranges from 24/7 on-site, shelter-specific staff who have both office and overnight space to DV organizations whose general staff provide advocacy, support, and services to off-site shelter residents through regular, daily and/or scheduled meetings when and if they have someone in the shelter. There are significant numbers of shelters that fall along the full spectrum of shelter use and staffing levels and there are pros and cons to both on-site and off-site staffing in shelter environments. If done properly, any level of staffing can be as safe and effective as any other.

### **EFFECTIVE STAFFING AND QUALITY ADVOCACY:**

As long as shelters put staff training, key safety and procedural practices in place, limited staffing is not a problem. The ability to provide quality advocacy to those residing in shelter is not predicated on staffing levels, but rather staff training.

Survivors residing in shelters are capable adults used to living independent lives and do not need to be watched over. Some residents feel more comfortable having shelter staff on-site while others feel less “controlled” and more independent when staff is not on-site. Increased presence of staff does not necessarily translate to quality advocacy for those in shelter; staff who spend longer hours in shelter but are overly focused on rules and monitoring the actions of residents can create an oppressive atmosphere in a shelter, much like the controlling environment of an abusive living situation. Authentic advocacy provided in a trauma-informed manner regardless of how often and how long advocates are present in the shelter setting can provide a survivor with far greater satisfaction; mitigate trauma and promote healing.

Advocates who really understand survivor-centered advocacy can create an environment that is safe and deliver quality advocacy even if they have less presence in the shelter facility. There are many models for governing and staffing shelters. What allows any model to be effective is the context in which the staff works with the residents.

## SAFETY:

Regardless of the frequency of staff presence in the shelter facility, all shelters must have safety procedures in place. These include:

- Smoke alarms
- Annual fire inspections
- Evacuation plan
- Some type of security system
- Building safety inspections
- Written safety procedures known by staff and residents
- Phones
- Access to staff who can respond quickly when needed.

If problems arise in the shelter, there should be a written procedure that is both visible and accessible that describes how shelter residents can contact staff when needed and the shelter must provide its residents with the means contact staff. Shelters should provide adequate supplies of food and other essentials for residents, a grievance procedure, daily check-ins, and regularly re-evaluate shelter policies and procedures.

## NEGATIVE OCCURRENCES:

Lastly, experience shows that complaints, theft, building maintenance issues, etc. occur irrespective of staffing levels. As any 24/7 staffed shelter can substantiate, these are products of communal living, especially when the community consists of strangers, each trying to cope with varying degrees of trauma.

## SUMMARY:

While many shelters might like to have staff in the shelter facility for at least a few hours each day, the ability to do so is often limited by available resources. Domestic Violence programs across Colorado and the nation work to create the best options possible for providing quality advocacy and safe shelter with the limited resources they have, for the survivors and children who reach out to them for assistance. As long as domestic violence organizations put key safety and procedural practices in place, and train advocates on creating appropriate relationships and providing client-centered advocacy with those residing in shelter, limited staffing should not be perceived as a problem. Per information from the National Network to End Domestic Violence - shelters that have taken the steps to increase staff training in trauma informed, voluntary, victim-centered advocacy, and decrease focus on rules, ridged and monitored policies and procedures for both shelter and case management, have seen a significant improvement in survivor satisfaction and advocate satisfaction.

\* Additional Note: Shelter – bricks and mortar of a residential facility and the 24/7 staffing make for the most expensive and least flexible kind of service. Discussions are beginning to take place about how resources are much more wisely spent on advocacy with individuals and systems to keep survivors safely in their own homes and/or in their own communities so they can keep their jobs, their support systems, and their kids can keep their friends and their school system.