

HOW SHELTERS PREPARE FOR GENDER INTEGRATION

TIPSHEET #3

Integrating people of all genders into a previously single-gender shelter may require shifting existing attitudes of shelter staff, as well as changing rules, policies, and procedures. Being proactive is key, rather than waiting until the first new residents arrive to make vital shifts. Gender integration can seem like a big change, but with solid preparation it usually isn't a big challenge.

10 Ways Shelters Can Prepare To Integrate All Genders

1. Have open and ongoing conversations.

According to staff in gender-integrated shelters, the most important and effective way to prepare and address concerns is through ongoing education and frank discussions with staff and residents alike—in staff meetings, monthly trainings, strategic planning sessions, and throughout day-to-day operations. Keep in mind that when staff handle situations with residents appropriately, residents will feel respected and will follow the lead of staff when interacting with transgender and non-binary residents.

2. Hold trainings for staff.

Staff trainings prior to gender integration makes a big difference. Effective trainings focus on cultural competency skills and reducing bias. A national training and technical assistance provider like FORGE, a local LGBT anti-violence project, or a local trans or LGBT organization can help provide training. It is also important to allow staff to continue their learning, through opportunities to ask questions and apply what they learn. Make sure training isn't a one-time event; a best practice is to provide cultural competency training once a year for all staff.

3. Form partnerships with agencies doing related work.

Reach out and develop or deepen relationships with agencies and groups that do related work, such as domestic violence shelters that are already gender-integrated, mental health agencies that specifically work with survivors of all genders (particularly those that host gender-integrated

“ Gender-integrated shelters: IN THEIR OWN WORDS

The most important thing you can do is make sure staff are well versed and comfortable about gender and gender identity, because one of the biggest trip-ups we have is saying we're going to serve people and then not being prepared once they show up.

support groups), agencies that serve minority populations (disability and aging organizations often have more experience working with many genders), LGBT community centers and health centers, support groups for trans people, and more. Share that your shelter is making the change to provide services to survivors of all genders and explore new collaborations.

4. Update policies and procedures.

Conduct a holistic assessment of your shelter's policies and procedures and make any needed changes so that people of all genders will be fully included at every level, starting from first contact through residency, programming, support groups, case management, transitional housing, and all the way to leaving shelter. This assessment may include revisiting everything from intake forms and screening protocols to housing arrangements and toilet and shower facilities (see *Tip-sheet #5, Creating Trans Inclusive Bathrooms in Shelters*) to insurance coverage and nondiscrimination policies.

5. Make any needed changes to housing arrangements.

Shelter structure/configuration has a large impact on how residents are roomed, but there are always options and best practices for how to use a space as inclusively as possible. Gender-integrated shelters that are able to provide private single rooms or apartments report that this is an ideal scenario that benefits everyone in ways that go far beyond gender. If single rooms are not an option, find ways to increase everyone's privacy and comfort through no- or low-cost options such as having room dividers, installing locks on bathroom doors, or creating schedules for showering.

In a gender-integrated shelter, residents should always be allowed to self-identify in terms of gender; no one should be automatically or forcibly assigned to a sex-segregated space based on identity documents, anatomy, or appearance. Keep in mind that not all people identify as women or men.

6. Comprehensively expand existing resource and referral lists.

Expand any resource lists for staff to include resources and referrals specific to trans people, LGBT people more broadly, and trans and non-trans men. Utilize contacts and relationships with trans and LGBT organizations to do this. Make sure that your resource lists remain up-to-date and that the sources are reputable and vetted (agencies or providers may claim to be "LGBT-friendly" yet in practice be only prepared to support gay and lesbian people).

“ Gender-integrated shelters: IN THEIR OWN WORDS

The more privacy you have, the better. Everyone deserves privacy regardless of their gender identity. People are able to heal better when they have their own refuge.

“ Gender-integrated shelters: IN THEIR OWN WORDS

I am proud that we have so many resources for trans people now. We have places they can go if they want to change their names/identification and get proper hormones and not street hormones. We have a therapist who is trans that we can call in to help trans clients. I mean, trans clients are really just a different type of client that needs different resources. It's not any big mystery.

7. Create or revise resident handbooks or intake guides.

Providing simple and accessible guidelines to all residents when they arrive can go a long way toward helping everyone feel as supported and safe as possible and understanding the boundaries for acceptable behavior. In addition to basic rules around communal living (such as chores, curfews, schedules, etc.), guidelines can address expectations for how residents will interact with staff and each other, what to do in the case of conflict or harassment from another resident or staff person, and why it's important to the shelter to house people of all genders, sexual orientations, cultures, and so forth.

8. Be open, honest, and available to the first residents who are able to take advantage of gender integration.

When the first trans woman, non-binary resident, trans or non-trans man, or mixed-gender family arrives, let them know that the shelter is new to integrating people of all genders. Encourage them to let staff know immediately if any issues or difficulties arise so that staff can respond appropriately. Keep an open dialogue going with them to make sure they are getting their needs met.

9. Update outreach materials.

After your agency feels ready to serve trans residents, make changes to your outreach materials—website, listings, publications, flyers and other promotional materials, and so on—to specify that you serve trans and non-binary survivors. Opening your doors to people of all genders won't do much good if no one knows about it, particularly if a shelter has previously only been open to women or if it has been unclear in the past whether trans people are welcome. You might also consider a press release, or at minimum sharing the news with other shelters, victim service agencies, and local and state LGBT organizations. Some shelters have re-branded, changing their female-focused name to one that indicates their new gender inclusion.

10. Be prepared for pushback.

Be ready for any negative reactions from staff, residents, board members, funders, community members, peer organizations, and referring agencies. See *Tipsheet #4, Addressing Concerns from Stakeholders*, for more on this topic.

Culture shift takes dedicated, consistent, and compassionate work, but in the end it results in a better experience for everyone and addresses issues of inclusion that go far beyond gender. Taking concrete, proactive steps to prepare to welcome new residents into a shelter is well worth the effort.

“ Gender-integrated shelters: IN THEIR OWN WORDS

We were very open with the first man that he was the first, and he was well informed of that and that was great. I told him he didn't need to educate staff at all on how to serve men, and I made it clear that if it didn't work out for him in any way that we would find him services elsewhere that would be safe. That really helped his transition into shelter and to feel comfortable. He was so grateful.

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