

CREATING TRANS-INCLUSIVE BATHROOMS IN SHELTERS

TIPSHEET #5

All people deserve to be able to access bathroom facilities without fear of harassment and violence, yet for transgender and gender non-binary people, bathrooms are frequently unsafe places. Creating trans-inclusive bathroom facilities is essential for integrating domestic violence shelter services for trans people.

8 Tips For Creating Trans-Inclusive Bathrooms

1. Take bathrooms seriously.

Never downplay the importance of having bathroom facilities that feel as safe as possible for everyone in a shelter. For people who have experienced intimate partner violence or other traumas, it can be hard to feel safe taking a shower or using a public toilet. For trans people, the risk is magnified. According to one 2013 study, 70% of trans people have been harassed, assaulted, or denied entrance while trying to use a restroom, and more than half of all trans people have experienced health problems from trying to avoid public restrooms, such as dehydration, kidney infections, and urinary tract infections.¹

2. Make non-gender-specific bathrooms available.

When possible, have at least one ADA-compliant bathroom available that can be used by someone of any gender. Some shelters have turned group bathrooms into individual bathrooms by installing a lock and changing the signage. Others have made their group bathrooms open to all genders and have an individual bathroom available elsewhere for those who want more privacy.

“ Gender-integrated shelters: IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Don't overthink it! If you were on a family vacation and rented a house or a condo and the kids brought friends ... you have to make the same accommodations! It's neutral territory. It's not anything more than that.

¹ Jody L. Herman, "Gendered Restrooms and Minority Stress: The Public Regulation of Gender and its Impact on Transgender People's Lives" (Los Angeles: The Williams Institute, 2013), retrieved from <http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Herman-Gendered-Restrooms-and-Minority-Stress-June-2013.pdf>.

3. Create consistent and clear signage.

Make sure everyone in the shelter knows what the bathroom options are and where different bathrooms are located. If you have single-occupancy bathrooms, label them inclusively (for example, as simply “bathroom”), rather than designating them as women’s or men’s rooms.

4. Implement clear and well-communicated policies.

Have bathroom policies that are clear, well communicated, and trans-inclusive. Most conflicts over bathrooms in shelters involve people not respecting the space or each other’s time, such as taking overly long showers and not cleaning up after themselves. Be clear about expectations and how to respect each other—including how to behave in multiple-occupancy non-gender-specific bathrooms, if applicable. Some shelters assign bathroom spaces, others work out a bathroom schedule that works for everyone, and still others have policies that only one person can use a bathroom at a time.

5. Train all of your staff.

It is vital to train all shelter staff to respect diversity in terms of gender expression and identity, and help staff understand the importance of making sure that people of all genders and all expressions are able to access bathroom facilities that work best for them. Help staff feel prepared for any conflicts that might arise.

6. It avoids revictimizing trans people.

Opponents of trans-inclusive bathroom policies often claim that they will lead to increased sexual assaults of women in bathrooms. These claims are false and should never be treated as legitimate.² There have been no reported cases of trans people attacking others in public restrooms, but there are many cases of trans people being attacked or discriminated against in bathrooms.³ The fact is that trans people want to use bathrooms for the same reasons everyone else does: to relieve themselves, wash their hands, check their appearance in the mirror, or help a child or other person with these basic human needs.

7. Don’t excuse transphobia.

It is understandable for survivors of intimate partner violence or other abuse to have fears about other people. The idea of sharing a bathroom with anyone else can be uncomfortable or scary. It is important to address concerns like these without excusing anti-trans sentiments. For example, be prepared to be clear that trans women are women, trans men are men, and that not everyone identifies as a woman or a man. Familiarize yourself with common myths and complaints and be ready to refute them.

“ Gender-integrated shelters: IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Make sure that staff understand why the bathrooms are [inclusive] so that if anyone has concerns about it, then they can all be on the same page. Get all of your staff on board. That is so important.

² National Task Force to End Sexual and Domestic Violence Against Women, “National Consensus Statement of Anti-Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence Organizations in Support of Full and Equal Access for the Transgender Community,” retrieved from <http://endsexualviolence.org/files/NTFNationalConsensusStmntTransAccessWithSignatories.pdf>.

³ See, for example, Marci Bianco, “Statistics Show Exactly How Many Times Trans People Have Attacked You in Bathrooms,” Mic, April 2, 2015, retrieved from <http://mic.com/articles/114066/statistics-show-exactly-how-many-times-trans-people-have-attacked-you-in-bathrooms>.

8. Treat bathrooms like a non-issue.

Many shelters have never had a problem implementing trans-inclusive bathroom policies because the staff models the fact that it's not a big deal. Non-gender-specific bathrooms are already an everyday part of life on buses, trains, and airplanes; in many restaurants and public buildings; in hotels and hostels; and plenty of other locations. Cultivating a culture where the default is to be inclusive of everyone ultimately creates more comfort and less anxiety for everyone.

Creating bathroom facilities and policies that insure access and safety for everyone in shelter is simple and essential to acknowledging all individuals as equal. Taking this key step goes a long way toward creating fully trans-inclusive shelter services.

“ Gender-integrated shelters: IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Treat it like it's no big deal and everyone will think it's no big deal and will get over their stress. Most people are really hesitant, but get over it. It will all be okay. ... Don't make it an issue and it won't be. If a client is uncomfortable, they can talk with staff, and you can educate them or make other arrangements for them.

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