

DEALING WITH CONFLICT AND BIAS IN GENDER-INTEGRATED SHELTERS

TIPSHEET #8

Most conflict in gender-integrated shelters arises over issues that are universal in all shelters, such as conflicts over space or possessions, personality clashes, and so forth. That said, conflict that occurs due to gender-based bias, prejudice, and discrimination can present itself on all levels of an organization and, if not handled properly, can have a devastating effect.

10 Tips For Preventing, Addressing, and Resolving Conflict And Bias

1. Inform incoming clients in advance that the shelter is gender-integrated.

Shelters can head off problems by being clear with incoming residents that they serve survivors of all genders. This can be done during screening and intake interviews, as well as on intake forms and elsewhere. In cases where it is possible that a new resident could be admitted at night while other residents are sleeping, is also helpful to be clear with current residents that such a scenario may occur.

2. Keep expectations for staff clear and firm.

It's important to clearly model and enforce the fact that bias, prejudice, and discrimination will not be tolerated among staff. In job postings and interviews for new staff, address this head-on and seek out staff who fully embrace the values of the shelter and its mission to serve survivors of all genders. Be sure to give people a chance to learn from their mistakes, but avoid making excuses for continued discriminatory or biased behavior.

“ Gender-integrated shelters: IN THEIR OWN WORDS

We've had incidents. We don't tolerate it with staff. When we hire people we're really clear about our mission, etc. If it comes up that the person can't serve a certain person, we let them go.

“ Gender-integrated shelters: IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Don't allow it! Don't allow homophobic, racist, sexist, etc. remarks at all. Address things as they come up, but if you're cool about things, then clients will be too.

3. Keep expectations for clients clear and firm.

Set clear and firm rules about how shelter residents are expected to treat each other and enforce them without fail. Frame bias, prejudice, and discrimination as a form of violence and be clear that absolutely no form of violent conduct is allowed, whether physical or verbal. When single incidents arise, treat them as opportunities for education and skill building and give residents a chance to change their attitudes and behavior, but always address harmful or bullying actions.

4. Hold regular “house meetings.”

Some shelters hold regular gatherings with residents to provide intentional space for airing any issues and also to give residents more opportunities to interact with each other and get to know one another, preventing potential conflicts from building up.

5. Empower staff and clients to report instances of conflict or bias.

Be clear with both staff and clients what the options and procedures are for reporting conflict or bias—whether personally experienced or witnessed. Stress that reporting instances of conflict or bias can be a positive way to help the shelter community and personally counter violence.

6. Emphasize survivors’ commonality.

Many conflicts reported by gender-integrated shelters are based in fear, such as the fear that trans people, men, or lesbian, gay, and bisexual people are dangerous. The first approach should be to emphasize that everyone in the shelter shares the experience of being victimized and therefore is in need of acceptance, safety, and respect.

7. Provide education and foster familiarity.

In instances where bias or prejudice is based in misinformation or stereotypes, educating the biased client or staff person can help resolve the issue. See *Tipsheet #4, Addressing Concerns from Stakeholders*, for factual rebuttals to common fears. Most people aren’t intentionally trying to be hurtful; gently helping them understand the impact of their words or actions and the lived experience of people who are different from them can go a long way. Similarly, creating opportunities for people to safely get to know each other and hear each other’s stories can reduce people’s biases and the interpersonal conflicts that might arise because of them.

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“Confronting Bias with a Trauma-Informed Lens”

www.forge-forward.org

“ Gender-integrated shelters: IN THEIR OWN WORDS

We had a nurse with children in shelter, and we had a trans woman in shelter, and the nurse immediately came to us and said the trans woman would give her kids AIDS. We were so shocked because she was a nurse and should know better. We gave her information and educated her. We offered to relocate her and her children. In the end, the two became really good friends and were inseparable.

8. Emphasize safety measures.

After reinforcing survivors' commonality and gently providing education or information, another helpful step is to review how frightened clients can feel safer—for example, giving out alert buttons, pointing out cameras in communal areas, reminding people their bedroom doors lock, and/or discussing the role of staff in ensuring the safety of all residents.

8. Mediation.

Some shelters engage in formal or informal mediation efforts between clients who are in conflict. Note that this option works best when there is an active conflict between both parties, and is not appropriate in instances where one client has a problem with another based solely on that person's gender identity or expression. In these cases, the trans client should not be involved in the resolution. Clients should never be put in the position of forcibly being retraumatized due to another client's intolerance or forced to advocate for their own basic humanity when staff could handle it instead.

8. Refer or re-house the distressed person.

In instances where clients are not comfortable sharing space with people of other genders, or engage in prejudiced or bullying ways toward others, it should always be an option to transfer them to other shelters or living environments. Note that a person who is targeted by the distressed person should never be the one who is moved or asked to leave.

When conflict and bias are addressed immediately, consistently, compassionately, and with the seriousness they deserve, it will lead to a healthier and safer shelter environment for all.

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