

ADDRESSING CONCERNS FROM STAKEHOLDERS

TIPSHEET #4

When making the change to become a gender-integrated shelter, it is vital to be prepared for pushback and ready to respond appropriately, whether concerns come from staff or residents (who, according to gender-integrated shelters, are the most common sources of complaint), or board members, community members, peer organizations, and referring agencies (who generally show less resistance and voice fewer concerns).

8 Tips for Addressing Pushback

1. Listen.

The primary way to address pushback is to make sure the concerned person has a chance to feel heard and respected. Allow space for stakeholders—staff, board members, volunteers, and residents (including, of course, transgender and gender non-binary residents)—to voice their concerns and share their feelings by giving them your full attention, without judgment or interruption.

2. Be compassionate.

Almost every concern comes from a place of fear, and those fears are usually due to painful life experiences. It is completely understandable for survivors of intimate partner violence or other abuse—as well as caring shelter staff, other professionals and providers, and non-offending family members—to have fears about safety. Validate concerned peoples' feelings and normalize that survivors may feel unsafe, uncertain, and uncomfortable in new situations and with new people—such as when entering shelter for the first time. Avoid getting defensive, and reinforce the fact that it can be hard to feel safe—without confirming the idea that certain people or situations are inherently unsafe.

3. Ask clarifying questions.

Most shelter staff have received training on active listening. Remembering these skills and using them will help all residents feel more understood, validated, and respected. Make sure you understand where the person who is concerned about gender integration is coming from, and show that you are listening fully by asking clarifying questions before immediately reacting to the stated concern. Practice using the question, “can you tell me more...?” which gently and non-defensively helps illuminate whatever is at the core of the concern.

4. Counter myths and stereotypes.

Almost all concerns that gender-integrated shelters report are based in myths and stereotypes. Notably, staff usually prove to be the biggest challenge before, during, and after a shelter changes its admissions process. See the chart below for rebuttals to the most frequently reported fears among staff and residents in response to gender integration.

| Most common fears in response to gender integration | Facts and responses to fears |
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| FEAR: All men are abusers. | FACT: Men are almost just as likely to experience intimate partner violence as women are. Roughly 29% of all men are survivors, as compared with roughly 32% of all women. ¹ |
| FEAR: Abuse always happens between men and women. | FACT: Intimate partner violence occurs between women and women and between men and men at the same rates as it occurs between men and women. ² |
| FEAR: Male residents will sexually assault resident women or children. | FACT: Male survivors or family members seeking shelter from abusive relationships are no more likely to sexually assault other residents than female residents are. |
| FEAR: Men who are abusers to survivors in the shelter will try to get admitted. | FACT: It is rare, but sometimes abusers do try to follow their partner into shelter. This can be true of abusers of any gender. This is why the shelter's screening protocols are so thorough—our first priority is keeping survivors safe. |
| FEAR: The presence of men will invite romantic, sexual, or abusive relationships with resident women. | FACT: Romantic relationships may arise in shelters—between a woman and a woman, between a woman and a man, or between a man and a man. What is more important than the presence of a relationship is the presence of full consent. No abuse of any kind will be tolerated within the shelter, and any form of abusive behavior should be reported to staff. |
| FEAR: Gay men and trans women will molest children in the shelter. | FACT: There is no data or evidence that gay men or trans women are likely to molest children—in fact, there is evidence that they are less likely to do so than other people. |
| FEAR: Non-trans women will no longer want to stay in the shelter. | FACT: Gender-integrated shelters don't work for some people for many different reasons, and we will always help people find housing that meets their needs. However, such shelters appeal to many people that this shelter may not have previously served, such as women with older male children, trans women, gender non-binary individuals, and trans and non-trans men. |
| FEAR: We will lose funding over this. | FACT: Gender-integrated shelters have not reported losing funding due to becoming gender-integrated. |

¹ Michelle C. Black and others, "The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey: 2010 Summary Report" (Atlanta: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011), retrieved from https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/nisvs_report2010-a.pdf.

² Taylor N.T. Brown and Jody L. Herman, "Intimate Partner Violence and Sexual Abuse Among LGBT People: A Review of Existing Research" (Los Angeles: The Williams Institute, 2015), retrieved from <http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Intimate-Partner-Violence-and-Sexual-Abuse-among-LGBT-People.pdf>.

5. Center the mission and values of the shelter.

In addressing why the shelter is making the decision to integrate people of all genders, center the mission and values of the shelter and its responsibility to be of service to all survivors. This can help bring the focus of the conversation back to providing equal and respectful services to all survivors, regardless of gender, rather than allowing fears to run rampant.

6. Be clear, confident, and firm.

Shelters have had experience with hundreds if not thousands of survivors, whereas fears are often based on hearsay or speculation. Share facts (such as the ones in the chart above) and also your own experiences with diverse residents. Remind concerned people of the shelter's unwavering dedication to the safety of all people served by it.

7. Explore options and alternatives.

If possible, explore with concerned people whether anything might help address their concerns—again, without affirming any harmful myths. For example, if a concerned resident doesn't feel safe in the shelter, staff can support the person with safety planning to help identify ways to feel safer. After supportively listening, it may be appropriate to remind residents that feeling uncomfortable is not always the same as being unsafe. Some shelters have provided in-shelter options of alert buttons (using the same technology as medical alert buttons to call for help in an emergency) and moving a concerned resident's room closer to staff or common rooms. Whenever possible, find solutions that allow all residents to stay in shelter and close to their community, rather than finding other housing options for the resident who feels uncomfortable.

8. Work as a team.

All shelter staff should be trained and responsible for dealing with residents—or other staff—who push back against shelter guidelines or don't respect other residents. Pushback around gender integration should be treated just like any other breach of agreed-upon rules or inappropriate behavior, and staff need to be unified in their commitment to serve people of all genders and ready to support each other in resolving concerns. (It is also helpful to have clear, written policies about inclusion and nondiscrimination. See *Tipsheet #3, How Shelters Prepare for Gender Integration*, for more suggestions.) In addition, make sure that you have at least one contact with LGBT expertise with whom you can touch base in particularly difficult situations, for support and guidance.

“ Gender-integrated shelters: IN THEIR OWN WORDS

[Female] clients felt men should have their own shelters because [the clients] had been victimized by men so they shouldn't have to be around men at all. We educated them about who a victim is and it doesn't matter whether they're male or female, both can be victims. We offered to help take them to other shelters if they felt that unsafe.

“ Gender-integrated shelters: IN THEIR OWN WORDS

There was one man who was straight who had a problem with a trans woman, and he ended up leaving after we told him we wouldn't tolerate his behavior and gave him a referral list of other places he could go if he wouldn't shape up.

When everyone involved in making the shift to becoming a gender-integrated shelter is ready and prepared to compassionately and firmly counter pushback, it helps residents and other stakeholders feel more secure and ultimately helps ensure a smooth transition to gender integration and a positive long-term outcome.

**“ Gender-integrated shelters:
IN THEIR OWN WORDS**

It was mainly male staff who were uncomfortable with taking in LGBTQ clients, and we talked to them about their feelings. The staff members eventually were educated via trainings and etc. Then once they were exposed to the LGBTQ community, they realized they're like everyone else and they need help.

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