



# Tool 3: Polishing Our Practices and Procedures

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*Part of the “Come on In: Reimagining Shelter as a Healing Space for Adult Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse” toolkit*

A shelter’s policies and procedures (including shelter rules) can either support or hinder your ability to serve survivors in a trauma-informed, healing-centered way. As you work to make your shelter services more supportive for adult survivors of child sexual abuse, the most important step to start with is reviewing and updating the current shelter rules to better align with trauma-informed values.

Within shelters, rules have often been created to prevent harm. However, many of these rules – which were made with a “one size fits all” mindset – can be retraumatizing for survivors of sexual violence. These rules tend to put a focus on what safety looks like for white and able-bodied survivors, and not what safety means for survivors of color, queer and trans survivors, survivors with disabilities, Deaf survivors, and survivors with other marginalized identities.

Rules by their very nature are meant to control and modify a person’s behaviors. In their experiences with abuse, survivors of sexual violence and domestic violence have had their basic bodily autonomy and choices taken away. When shelter rules do the same, they’re no longer keeping shelter guests safe. Nor are they creating an environment where healing can happen.

For adult survivors of child sexual abuse, privacy and a sense of control (over their environment, their routine, their decisions, etc.) are two of the most important factors in feeling safe. Knowing this, shelter rules and practices need to be restructured in a way that promotes survivor empowerment and helps shelter guests regain a sense of control over their own lives.

The best approach to doing this is through individualized, one-on-one advocacy with each shelter guest. This advocacy begins with intake and continues throughout the entire guest's stay. This allows shelter advocates and shelter guests to build a trusting and present relationship where guests feel safe sharing their needs, triggers, and thoughts as they come up over time.

Tool 2: A Space of Safety offered up organizational changes on how to help guests feel a greater sense of safety within your shelter space as well as how to safety plan with survivors of sexual violence. Tool 3: Polishing our Practices and Procedures focuses on examining and revising your current shelter rules and practices to be more trauma-informed and supportive of survivors of sexual violence, specifically adult survivors of child sexual abuse.

It's important to understand that *how* a shelter assesses and develops their policies is equally as important as what the policies say. It's vital that everyone working at the shelter have a shared understanding of the context for all policies and the core organizational values they support. This will help shelter advocates better understand how and why these rules (or lack thereof) have been created and how they can implement them in a trauma-informed, supportive way.

**Remember, the goal of trauma-informed care in shelter is to provide the best quality and most personalized care to every guest.** Keeping this in mind, here are some guiding questions\* to help you update your current rules and practices. For those of you already doing the work of revising, consider these questions an opportunity to inspire new ideas and reignite personal and team conversations around your current practices and structures.



- ▶ How does this practice, rule, or procedure align with the values of privacy, respect, and empowerment?
- ▶ How does this practice, rule, or procedure align with the value of personalized and/or individualized advocacy?
- ▶ How does this practice, rule, or procedure align with the value of creating culturally relevant services? For example, is smudging allowed in your shelter? If not, what needs to change so that your shelter can allow this cultural practice?
- ▶ How does this practice, rule, or procedure align with the value of equalizing power and privilege?

- ▶ How does this practice, rule, or procedure align with the value of open and honest communication? Does it encourage survivors to hide, deny, or adjust their experiences with us?
- ▶ How does this practice, rule, or procedure align with our knowledge and understanding of the impact of trauma? How might it contribute to triggers or retraumatization?
- ▶ How does the language used in this practice, rule, or procedure include or exclude survivors of sexual violence as participants in services? Consider these examples of excluding: Referring to abusive partners, referring specifically to domestic violence services, or stating that all guests have experienced violence in their home.

*\* These questions were adapted from [How the Earth Didn't Fly into the Sun: Missouri's Project to Reduce Rules in Domestic Violence Shelters.](#)*



### *Additional questions to consider:*

- ▶ What was the context when this practice, rule, or procedure was set?
  
- ▶ Is today's context the same as when the practice, rule, or procedure was set? What's different?
  
- ▶ Whose needs are prioritized by this practice, rule, or procedure?
  
- ▶ How does this practice, rule, or procedure impact survivors?
  
- ▶ How does this practice, rule, or procedure impact shelter advocates?
  
- ▶ Does this practice, rule, or procedure recognize shelter advocates and/or survivors in all aspects of their identities?

- ▶ How is this practice, rule, or procedure implemented?
  - » If there is a disconnection between policy or rule and practice, why is that?
  - » Should the practice be instituted into policy or rule, or do you need to change practices?
  
- ▶ What would it feel like to have a survivor seeking services learn about these practices, rules, and procedures? To gain a larger understanding of how practices, rules, and procedures are meeting or not meeting the needs of guests, shelters may want to consider including the following questions on exit evaluations/satisfaction surveys:
  - » How did you feel when you read or learned about the rules for the first time?
  - » What do you see the rules accomplishing?
  - » Have you ever wanted to do something that the rules prevented you from doing? How did this feel?

For additional information about updating your shelter rules and to read about the experiences of real shelter programs, check-out:

- ▶ [How the Earth Didn't Fly into the Sun: Missouri's Project to Reduce Rules in Domestic Violence Shelters](#)
- ▶ [Building Dignity: Design Strategies for Domestic Violence Shelters](#)



NOTES



### **Tool 3: Polishing our Practices and Procedures**

February 2023

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Graphic and publication design by: Norio Umezu Hall, RSP

This product was supported by cooperative agreement number 2019-V3-GX-K040, awarded by the Office for Victims of Crime, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this product are those of the contributors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U. S. Department of Justice.

