



Tool 4: Our Culture as an Investment

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

Shelter advocates work incredibly hard and care deeply about the survivors they serve. And, shelter advocates are constantly asked to do the most with the least. Shelter advocates tend to receive the least pay, be the least supported with training, and receive the least supervisory support and space to debrief about their work.

And despite having the hardest job in programs, shelter advocates are still asked to take on almost all the roles within the shelter at once – especially during evenings, overnights, and weekends. This includes being the sole shelter personnel on duty, supporting and advocating for all guests (adults and children) in the shelter, and answering the helpline. These tasks, when combined, make it impossible for shelter advocates to be properly present, actively listen, and support shelter guests.

In response to this tremendous amount of responsibility, shelter advocates are burning out, becoming detached, and feeling like they're just going through the motions in their interactions with survivors. They might also be coping with triggers or resurfacing traumatic memories of their own. In trying to manage all that's being asked of them, shelter advocates might, understandably, lean towards creating rigid rules and expectations to make their jobs manageable. But it's these types of rules that can be retraumatizing for survivors accessing shelter services and discourage them from developing a trusting relationship with shelter advocates.

To properly continue trauma-informed shelter work, everyone in this field has to prioritize the wellness of shelter advocates in a more holistic way.

By giving shelter advocates the resources, training, and support they deserve, they will have more flexibility, more curiosity, and more creativity in their interactions with survivors. We recommend you spend time talking with your shelter advocates about their individual needs, concerns, etc. and coupled with these trauma-informed strategies, create a plan to better prioritize their well-being moving forward.

Tenets of Trauma-Informed Work



Strategies for Prioritizing the Well-Being of Shelter Advocates

1. Practice Empowering Leadership

- ▶ Remind shelter advocates of their value to your organization – both as human beings and as important resources to the community.
- ▶ Use trauma-informed supervision practices. In the same way that adult survivors of child sexual abuse deserve to receive trauma-informed services from our shelters, shelter advocates also deserve trauma-informed workplaces. Trauma-informed supervision considers the cumulative exposure to stressful and traumatic situations – including personal experiences with racism and oppression – that shelter advocates experience. This type of supervision then works to actively reduce the effects of these experiences by providing consistent opportunities for reflection, debriefing, and support. For more information on trauma-informed supervision, [visit our website](#) for the following resources: [Change Starts Within: Strengthening Services](#) and [Building Cultures of Care: A Guide for Sexual Assault Services Programs](#).

2. Create a work culture that supports and practices wellness.

- ▶ Ensure shelter advocates have manageable workloads.
- ▶ Do not have shelter advocates be the sole person on duty. If you're a small team, utilize the assistance of volunteers – especially during busier times like evenings, overnights, and weekends.
- ▶ Do not have shelter advocates answer [the helpline](#) while on duty, but instead delegate this responsibility to volunteers or other staff. This will help free up your shelter advocate's ability to be more present with shelter guests and manage their other responsibilities.

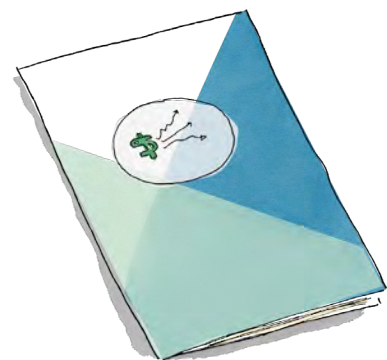
- ▶ Explore what behaviors are being rewarded in your organization. Are you telling shelter advocates to set boundaries but then actually rewarding self-sacrificing behaviors, such as rarely using sick or vacation time? If so, it's important to realign your organization's practices with its messages.

3. Provide Initial and On-going Training

- ▶ Provide all shelter advocates training specific to serving adult survivors of child sexual abuse as well as opportunities for continued training.
- ▶ Provide ongoing anti-racism and anti-oppression training and discussions that support conversations between shelter advocates, within the larger community, and between others doing this work.

4. Put time, thought, and money into comprehensive and holistic benefits.

- ▶ Pay all shelter advocates a competitive, living wage. This includes providing simple IRA retirement funds with an organizational match.
- ▶ Provide health, dental, and vision insurance with the organization contributing a large portion of the premium.
- ▶ Provide shelter advocates with adequate vacation and sick time. This necessitates organizational commitment and structures that allow shelter advocates to take time off.



5. *Stand Together*

- ▶ Hold regular team meetings that are accessible to all shelter advocates. Create opportunities for shelter advocates to meaningfully contribute to the planning and agenda setting of these meetings.

- ▶ Provide structural relief via “relief workers” who would be hourly, on contract, etc.
 - » “Relief workers” would allow shelter advocates to periodically and regularly get away from the busy work environment to have focused meetings and retreats together.
 - » “Relief workers” would make it more possible for shelter advocates to take mental health days, sick days, vacation days, and/or be relieved of some crisis-related duties – especially when they themselves are in crisis or emotional hardship in their personal life.

- ▶ Create a work culture that promotes joy and connection as an antidote to vicarious trauma.
 - » Encourage connections, morale, and relationships through working in teams, social activities, and peer support networks.
 - » Celebrate successes together

The strategies in this tool are taken from a workshop, “Supporting and Sustaining Our Staff,” presented by Mira Yusef and Valerie Davis at the 2017 National Sexual Assault Conference.

Tool 4: Our Culture as an Investment

February 2023

This publication was written by Valerie Davis and Leah Green, with contributions from Carly Lanning (Voices Editorial) and the Building Resilience team: Kris Bein (Resource Sharing Project), Nancy Smith (Activating Change), Cynthia Totten (Just Detention International), Nicole Matthews (Minnesota Indian Women’s Sexual Assault Coalition), Erica Blackwood (the North Carolina Coalition Against Sexual Assault), and Olga Trujillo, J.D.

© Resource Sharing Project, 2023. All rights reserved.

The content of this publication may be reprinted with the following acknowledgement: This material was reprinted, with permission, from the Resource Sharing Project’s publication entitled “Tool 4: Our Culture as an Investment”. This report is available by visiting www.resourcesharingproject.org.

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.

