



Tool 6: An Open Invitation

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

Currently, shelters are set up to primarily serve survivors of domestic violence, many of whom may also be adult survivors of child sexual abuse. While some shelters are available to folks who have recently experienced sexual violence, they often still require survivors to be in imminent danger to qualify for services. The reality of sexual violence is that many survivors of recent sexual assault might not qualify for shelter services in the days or weeks following the violence. But despite not qualifying, survivors still need a safe space that will help them cope and embark on their healing journeys.

Adult survivors of child sexual abuse, are also unlikely to meet current shelter requirements of being in imminent danger, unless they are experiencing other forms of violence such as domestic abuse. While their abuse might be in the past, they may continue to have long-term effects of the sexual violence like flashbacks or lack of emotional safety. But shelters can be a place of respite for these adult survivors of child sexual abuse as they regain their balance and form connections with support systems.

The 'imminent danger' requirement to access shelters mean they serve only a small percentage of the survivor population. Instead, what if shelters were a place of respite for all survivors of sexual violence by removing this requirement? This would allow you to provide resources and build ongoing relationships with even more survivors in your community, including adult survivors of child sexual abuse.

By making your shelters a recognized support for any survivor of any form of sexual violence, you could serve many more survivors currently without your support, including:

- ▶ Adult survivors of child sexual abuse who are not currently experiencing domestic violence
- ▶ Survivors of sexual violence who are currently experiencing homelessness or inadequate housing. Oftentimes, in dealing with the ongoing effects of their trauma, survivors may experience homelessness or inadequate housing. A shelter can provide both respite and emotional support.
- ▶ Adult survivors of child sexual abuse who have stable housing and employment, but who are currently experiencing a temporary emotional crisis. This may look like an acute lack of emotional safety, flashbacks, disconnection, or other long-term impacts of sexual violence.
- ▶ Survivors of sexual violence who were recently released from prison or jail.
- ▶ Survivors who need community or more regular emotional support. For example, a survivor who is starting a new therapy practice and does not want to be alone.
- ▶ Survivors with previous experiences of abuse that need a few days to rest and reset.

To make shelters more inclusive and accessible to survivors within our communities, the current shelter models of communal living must be reconsidered and instead, move towards apartment style living. “Apartment style living” is a shelter model in which each individual survivor/family unit stays in living spaces that include bedrooms, bathrooms, kitchen, etc. separate from other guests. These apartments will often be grouped together in the same building or complex in which communal space will also be available for survivors to gather and connect with one another. These types of programs will also have shelter advocates onsite to provide support and advocacy to survivors. The benefits of shifting to this practice include:

- ▶ Survivors can live independently and with agency over their space, but with built in support.
- ▶ More flexibility for survivors of all physical and cognitive abilities, gender identities, and differing health, safety, and healing needs.
- ▶ Shelter advocates can more easily employ the recommendations outlined in Tools 2-5 of this toolkit.
- ▶ As the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us, separate living spaces keep viruses from spreading.



As you begin to rethink the rules and systems of your shelter, this is the time to rethink who you're currently serving and how you could be supporting even more survivors in your community who need emotional support and resources. The healing journey for survivors of sexual violence – especially adult survivors of child sexual abuse – is ongoing, making it deeply important that shelter services are open and supportive to this continuous process.

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