

Shelter Rules: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

WASHINGTON STATE
COALITION AGAINST



DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

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Rules provide guidelines when our individual needs and wants bump up against the needs and wants of someone else; potentially cause harm to ourselves or others, or throw us out of balance with the common goals of our community. Some of us hate rules and try to challenge each one that comes our way. Some of us embrace the structure that rules provide and rigidly follow each one down to the last mile per hour on the speedometer. Most of us fall somewhere in the middle, acknowledging that many rules positively reinforce our community structure while some are just plain ridiculous.

The rules we all develop for battered women's shelters are no different. The intent of the rules is:

- o To preserve the confidentiality and external safety of the shelter;
- o To assure the health standards and internal safety of the shelter; and
- o To provide an environment of mutual respect for residents and staff from different backgrounds and cultures and with a wide variety of personal living habits.

The good about these rules is the desire for the shelter community to be a safe, supportive environment for each woman and child. *The bad* about the rules is when they are too rigid to allow for unique circumstances or when there are too many to be realistically and evenly enforced (or remembered). *The ugly* about the rules is when shelter advocates are no longer able to be advocates and become the rule police. *The ugliest* is when the survivor, seeking to escape an abusive, oppressive environment, finds herself in an equally oppressive environment in shelter.

Confidentiality: the Sacred Cow

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disagree that the primary goal of shelter is to keep the survivor safely hidden. No one would argue about abusers not knowing shelter location. Domestic violence shelter staff is careful to keep address and all location information closed to the community in general. If a survivor's location is identified by the abusive partner, the family is quickly moved. Easy, right? Not so fast!

How about the child who tells his teacher where the shelter is? What about the resident who relies on her sister for transportation? Or the resident who missed the last bus after the AA meeting, and had another group member drop her off? How close is too close to shelter for a drop off or pick up point to meet trusted friends or family members? When does the safety from an abusive partner become a total separation from the rest of the support system that the survivor needs most in her life? And how does the advocate know whether anyone in that support system will disclose the location to the abusive partner? If one resident is asked to leave because her brother came too close to shelter, why can another resident stay if her mother makes an emergency trip to pick up a sick child? Does it make sense to ask a woman with two children under the age of five to walk six blocks with groceries when her sister could drop her off at the front door?

In our efforts to insure security for everyone, perhaps it is time to ask ourselves if we might not be placing a lot of responsibility on battered women. The women have a substantial stake in their own personal safety. Can we figure out a way to work with them to ensure their own and others' safety honestly and realistically? The cost of not doing so may result in our residents being less than truthful about their conversations and travel plans. The benefit of increased trust may be a better ability for staff to support the safety planning process. If a resident begins to fear the response of diligent staff, she may retreat into the same survival mode that she used with the abuser, and simply not share key information that might be critical to safety. Are we truly creating safety when this happens or just

the *illusion* of safety? Perhaps it is time to critically rethink how we provide safety and security and what our responsibility as shelter staff should be.

Health and Safety Standards

Many of these standards are set by the Washington State Administrative Code (WAC). The goal is for the shelter to be clean enough and safe enough that no one will become sick and/or get injured.

Implementation of these codes often results in pages of rules.

Leftover food in the house living room and bedrooms may attract a wide variety of creatures. Before long, a rule emerges that not only prohibits popcorn in the living room on movie nights, but a bedtime bottle or cup of milk for a restless child. Dirty diapers are to be taken out to the garbage immediately. Does this mean that the advocate should be hunting through the house's garbage cans to identify violators?

Expectations around chores usually evolve from these standards. Getting residents to do the chores is another challenge. Some may be clean freaks and dive in—and then become resentful because the rest of the house was content to have them do all of the work. Sometimes work schedules and court dates make the daily chores impossible for residents. Efforts to do a Saturday morning house clean-up will not be welcomed by the observing Jewish resident or the Seventh Day Adventist. A Hindu woman who just gave birth is prohibited by her religion to be in the kitchen. And what about the resident who is so deeply depressed that just getting out of bed in the morning is a major accomplishment? How are chore rules to be enforced? How does the advocate enforce chore rules for some, but not for others? And should someone actually be evicted because of a messy room or not taking a turn at dish duty?

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Corporal Punishment

How does an advocate enforce the no corporal punishment rule? Is it enough to tell women about using “time outs”, or does she need to do more? Is she standing outside a resident’s bedroom door listening for the sounds of spanking? Will the advocate make a CPS report if the child doesn’t get breakfast in the morning or if a mom loses her temper and yells at the child?

Community Living Environment

The goal for every shelter is to be a supportive environment that breaks the isolation of an abusive relationship and promotes self-determination for each survivor. However, too many rules related to communal living can undermine the possibilities of support and self-determination. The rules developed to define respectful behaviors in the context of communal living often come from one-time only situations.

The theft of one resident’s money may result in the requirement that all possessions of value and cash be locked up. A fight over a sweater (“I never told her she could borrow that”) or food (“whose been drinking my Coke?”) may result in rules prohibiting the sharing of belongings unless there’s a written agreement. What about the violent video a resident rents to watch on movie night? Or the toy gun that a six-year-old brought to shelter? Should children’s bedtimes be regulated? Should advocates enforce a lights-out time for everyone so school-age children and women who have early appointments are assured a good night sleep?

What were we saying about choices and self-determination with all these rules about how to conduct oneself in the shelter?! Sometimes staff efforts to be protective may be perceived as a need for control. Battered women may respond by concealing information. Staff may not be called upon to provide helpful support with advocacy and safety planning.

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Whatever shall we do?!

A limited number of rules is vital in order to make sure that confidentiality, safety, health, and mutual respect are foundational components of the environment. I would challenge program staff to make the rules no more than two pages, preferably one page. No one can remember much more than that, and it would cost a small fortune to translate volumes of rules into different languages. Keep “case by case” as a constant theme!

Confidentiality: Be clear about what your program means by confidentiality. Your staff may need to get clarity on this themselves before they can explain it clearly to residents. This might be obvious to staff, but the degree of confidentiality should be concisely written and thoroughly discussed. Make a distinction between maintaining safety and punishing rule breaking: If a child shares the shelter location with dad, everyone involved, especially the child, needs to understand that leaving shelter is not a punishment but a safety measure.

For some programs, it might be useful to rethink the idea of “confidential location” and instead focus on having a *secure building*. Many programs have been in the same location for years. When we consider the number of people (i.e., former residents, volunteers, former staff, board members, police officers, contractors, social workers, ambulance drivers, etc.) who know where the shelter is, how confidential is it? In small communities, it is likely that the shelter location is widely known. When this *is* the case, program staff may want to discuss new strategies for security that do not rest on an illusion of secrecy.

Health and safety rules need to be basic and tied to WACs with a logical explanation of potential impacts to everyone’s health. Try to stick to natural consequences (collective illness or the health inspector, who could close shelter, is coming). Group plans among residents on keeping the place clean should be encouraged. Advocates need to have Plan B when a resident’s physical or mental health, busy

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schedule, culture, religion, or personal habits somehow get in the way of the group plan. Instead of rigid enforcement by checking off a chore list or shortening shelter stays, mediation and intervention plans for individual residents and the household in general can feel more respectful. Also, if the shelter budget can include a paid service to come in weekly or twice a month to do the deep cleaning, chores might not turn into the huge deal they often become.

Corporal punishment is a sensitive topic for many women. It's a rule that needs an entire discussion, with a lot of emphasis on why it's a rule. Advocates need to be clear on their responsibilities and enforcement of this rule. Spanking is not considered child abuse and does not necessarily indicate that someone is a bad parent. So what are the talking points to request that physical punishment not be used without losing trust and an honest relationship with the mom? All staff need to have good training on this topic and feel comfortable engaging in the discussion and providing resources to women.

In addition to telling women what they *can't do* as parents while in our programs, we need to give thought to how we can support women's parenting. Battered women's parenting has often been undermined, compromised or distorted by the abuser; for this reason, we need to work from an empowering place of helping women reclaim their parenting. Instead of being critical and judgmental advocates can help a woman think through how the abuser influenced her parenting and distinguish that from the hopes and goals she has for her children and family life, and then support her plan to reclaim her parenting.

Community living: The fundamental requirement for communal living is mutual respect, which can be boiled down into one guideline. A well facilitated house meeting can make space for household discussions on what residents want their relationships to look like while at shelter and how to uphold that. Ultimately, our primary concerns are safety for

battered women and a functional group living environment. Rules that do not relate directly to those concerns should be reviewed.

In conclusion

When advocates feel like they're discussing rule enforcement more than they are domestic violence, it's time to look at the rules again. When advocates become the rule police, they are not able to do their job. Worthwhile advocacy and safety planning can only happen when there is trust. If residents start lying in order to cover for breaking rule, trust is gone, and the good of rules disintegrates to the ugly.

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