

Survivors' Responses to Shelter Rules: Findings from *Meetings Survivors' Needs Study*

The National Resource Center on Domestic Violence (NRC DV) and the University of Connecticut School of Social Work conducted a study to document how well domestic violence programs are addressing the needs of those reaching out to them for assistance. Released in 2008, **Meeting Survivors' Needs: A Multi-State Study of Domestic Violence Shelter Experiences (Shelter Study)**, provides important insights into the role that shelters play in survivors' efforts to escape violence and abuse. Results capture the voices and experiences of over 3,400 shelter residents in 215 programs across eight states. Data from this study reflecting survivors' responses to shelter rules are summarized below.

Additional information about these two studies, including copies of the full study report and other study materials, can be found at www.vawnet.org/research/MeetingSurvivorsNeeds/.

Findings Related to Shelter Rules

Shelter residents often face a variety of problems and challenges, attributable partly to the sudden change in circumstances, living in close proximity with other families, the crisis that led them to seek shelter in the first place, and attending to their children's reactions. In this study, survivors' noted a range of challenges, including finding privacy, getting along with other residents, and understanding and complying with shelter rules. During the thirty years that shelters have existed, rules have been developed to help ensure the safe and smooth operation of the shelter, such as those prohibiting the use of drugs or alcohol and shelter curfews. Some specific rules were developed in response to particular incidents, such as those related to disciplining children while at the shelter.

The study shows that some survivors struggle with shelter rules related to eligibility for admission (such as survivors with teenage boys or arrest records being admitted), what they must do while they are in residence (such as curfew and chores), and how long they may stay. These findings support programs' reconsiderations of some of these, and indicate that programs should find ways to allow for more consideration of the diversity of individual circumstances.

Respondents to this survey were asked about a variety of problems that the literature and the experience of advocates suggest are possible in shelters. They were also asked whether or not the problem had been resolved. Problems with shelter rules included issues with time limits (16% experienced, 50% resolved), curfew (14% experienced, 61% resolved), child discipline and monitoring (13% experienced, 66% resolved), and chores (13% experienced, 59% resolved).

Specific Findings

Time limits. Residents felt time limits were too short, inflexible, or not explained clearly with appropriate notice. Many noted the time limits didn't take into consideration that finding other living arrangements was difficult. As one wrote, "Not my fault apartments were full or I couldn't afford them." Another observed that, "they need to realize that some people have nowhere to go at all." Some felt the time limits forced them to go back to the abuser: "I was here for 90 days then ended up back in my abusive relationship because I had nowhere to go." One also noted she felt "overwhelmed and anxiety worrying about it." Fifty percent of these problems were resolved.

Curfew issues. These issues included conflicts with work and church. One noted that it "was embarrassing to leave church [because of curfew]." Another stated, "Evening service, church functions, visits with daughter all 'no.'" Some felt the curfew was too early: "We are grown women, 8:00 is ridiculous;" or that there was unequal enforcement: "They said no curfew but one woman and kids were kicked out when [they] came home at 9:05 pm." Others believed that curfew should be flexible. "Unbending, mothers and children should be able to spend time together on Christmas." Some thought curfew should be extended on weekends. Still others noted that it was annoying but understandable for safety. Sixty-one percent of these problems were resolved.

Child discipline issues. Some survivors reported problems with other residents' child monitoring. As one complained, "Some parents left other parents to discipline and monitor their kids." Another observed the following:

At times I felt there [was] little or no discipline. I felt some of the children in this home at times were totally out of control with parents taking advantage of everything good that this home represents and also so much disrespect to the other people and staff. I love children and do understand they are just that...children. As far as I am concerned there is no excuse for certain parents.

Others felt there was a lack of services that would allow for child monitoring: "I cannot do chores and watch my children at the same time." A common source of comment was restrictive rules on discipline—particularly the common shelter prohibition against corporal punishment. One commented that, "my children wanted to run over me because they knew they couldn't be spanked." Another wrote that "he is my child and I should be able to spank if I want." Sixty-six percent of these child discipline problems were reported resolved.

Chores. Issues with *chores* included feeling the chores were unequally enforced or distributed, or that exceptions were not considered. One wrote: "Because of my health condition...I am not able to lift and drag a commercial mop, or move furniture, or inhale bleach, or insecticide." Another objected to "the day you are supposed to mop the floors with ammonia. I'm 3 months pregnant." Others thought chores were not done properly by some or there wasn't enough structure. "Staff allowed other residents to be in control of chores, so I felt I had to respond to other residents not staff." Finally, some noted that

chores were hard to do with the time demands of jobs and children: “It’s very hard to hold down a full time job and make time for my children and do chores.” Fifty-nine percent of these problems were resolved. As one noted, “They were more lenient after I told them I have OCD.”

Overall. The problems that survivors’ identified that were the most likely to be resolved were conflicts with other women (73% resolved), issues with contacting their partner (67%), issues with child discipline and monitoring (66%), issues with curfew (61%), and problems with language/communication (61%). The problems that were the least likely to be resolved were feeling their customs were not respected (experienced by 5%; just 39% were resolved), the policies on teen boys (reported by 4%; 43% resolved), issues with the available food (a problem for 13%; 44% resolved), using the telephone (experienced by 8%; 47% resolved), and getting privacy (reported by 16%; 47% resolved).