**Guide for Policy and Form Creation or Revision**

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# Purpose of this Guide:

* This guide was created to help OVW T-housing programs assess their internal policies and forms for consistency with the OVW T-housing model, which requires voluntary, trauma-informed services.
* This guide recognizes that different programs are responding to different local contexts and transitional housing models (for example, congregate, scattered site, or subleased housing). As such, it offers questions that help programs consider whether their local policies, housing application forms, intake forms, welcome packets, and goal planning documentation are consistent with national OVW standards for voluntary, trauma-informed housing and services.

# General things to consider before creating a policy to determine if needed:

* What does the policy intend to accomplish?
* Was this policy created in response to one incident? If so, is it fair to apply the policy to all current and future survivors in the program?
* Is it possible to apply this policy equally across all participants?
* Can and do staff enforce the policy?
* Does the policy allow for flexibility if a survivor has extenuating circumstances?
* Is the policy rooted in survivor-centered and trauma-informed advocacy?
* Does the policy comply with the Voluntary Services Model, which states that support services cannot be a requirement to access or maintain housing?
* Is the policy appropriate for survivors of sexual violence that has occurred outside of the context of domestic violence, as well as for survivors of stalking, dating violence, and human trafficking?

# Things to consider once the policy has been written:

* Review all the same questions listed above under the process for considering whether a policy should be created.
* Does it contain words, such as: “will,” “must,” “should,” “shall,” “obey,” “recommended,” “suggestion,” etc. Why?
* Does the policy leave space for a survivor to not participate if they choose not to? Does participation in programming reflect the Voluntary Services Model?
	+ For example: does the policy state: “Community meetings are held once a week at 7 p.m. and all Transitional Housing residents should attend?”
		- If it does, ask: if a survivor is working, or is unable to attend, what is the next step for the advocate and the survivor? If the next step is to create a space where the survivor can learn about what was in the meeting at a later date, perhaps the language of the policy could read: “Community meetings are held at 7 p.m. on Wednesdays. If this time does not work for you, your advocate can relay the meeting minutes to you whenever it is convenient for you. If you would like to attend, but the time does not work, please let us know and we can see if we can reschedule the weekly meeting to better accommodate your schedule.”

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## Things to consider when creating the Application:

**Does the form: Consider:**

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| **Ask for identifying information of the applicant and their dependents?** *Date of birth, social security number, birth certificate, abuser information, detailed information about when, where, or the type of abuse that occurred, work history, criminal or civil court history, citizenship or immigration status, income verification, etc.*  | In order to minimize the amount of personally identifying information collected and documented in a client file, it is recommended that programs only for ask information that is absolutely necessary in order to determine eligibility for the program.  |
| **Require that a survivor disclose sensitive information?** *History of drug/alcohol use; history of trauma/immigration status/mental health/ educational history/work history/history of homelessness; explicit details about the type of abuse that occurred* | OVW supported transitional housing programs should align with best practices related to housing first and providing low-barrier housing for survivors.  |
| **Require that the survivor have experienced recent domestic violence in order to qualify?** | The OVW T-Housing Model requires that housing be available tosurvivors of sexual assault, dating violence, stalking, as well as domestic violence. While OVW T-Housing supported programs may choose to specialize in providing services to survivors of aparticular type of violence, it should be open to serving any survivor that seeks help from your program. Your program is required to provide any survivor seeking your assistance withavailable housing and services or with appropriate referrals tocomparable services when they are in your housing.  |
| **Require that the survivor be literally homeless or coming from domestic violence or emergency shelter?** | OVW T-Housing requires that the survivor be homeless or in need of transitional housing as a result of a situation of sexual assault, dating violence, stalking or domestic violence. This can include survivors who are currently housed but needing to leave that housing as a result of the applicable situations of violence. Therefore, literal homelessness or a referral from a shelter should not be considered an eligibility criterion.  |
| **Notify the survivor about the confidentiality of the contents of the documents and its limits within the OVW T-Housing program (either the victim services program that is receiving the OVW T-Housing grant or the OVW T-Housing program if the program is part of an umbrella organization)?** | It is part of a trauma-informed, voluntary services approach to inform survivors of confidentiality and is limits on all documents that they fill out.  |
| **Ask case management/goal setting questions?***Employment/work/housing plans; questions around how the applicant would use the time in Transitional Housing* | The OVW T-Housing Model dictates that Case Management is voluntary. Therefore, a survivor’s intention to set/complete goals should not be considered an eligibility criterion and should not be included on the application.  |
| **Require a reference check?***From an employer, landlord, or shelter worker where the applicant might be staying* | OVW strongly advises against conducting these reference checks as impressions of survivors should not be taken into account when considering an applicant for transitional housing.  |
| **Require the survivor to disclose a great deal of personal information without guarantee that there will be a spot for them in transitional housing?**  | When offering an application, it must be considered that the applicant may not be housed by the program (either due to space, or not meeting the minimum requirements). Therefore, collecting as little information as possible is advised.  |
| **Does the application outline the type of housing options and services that are available for the survivor?**  | The application should be as transparent as possible to allow the survivor to make an informed choice in accepting the placement in the transitional housing.  |
| **Allow room for the survivor to choose to not answer questions that are uncomfortable for them to answer?** | In order to reduce re-traumatizing questions or questions that may make survivors feel pressure to share information that they would rather keep private, it is suggested that advocates let survivors know that they only need to answer what they are comfortable answering.  |
| **Require a background check or drug/alcohol screening?**  | The OVW Transitional Housing grant program does not allow for a survivor to be denied services due to alcohol or drug use. Therefore, drug histories and drug screenings should not be collected and used as eligibility criteria.  |
| **Is a credit check required in order to be considered for transitional housing program?**  | The OVW grant does not allow for a credit score to be used as eligibility criteria.  |
| **Require the survivor to submit identifying documents?** *Driver’s licenses/Identification cards; birth certificates; immigration paperwork; leases; housing search and applications* | In order to preserve the confidentiality and privacy of all survivors accessing OVW T-Housing, it is best practice to refrain from asking that survivors submit these documents, and to refrain from storing these documents in the survivor’s file. Lastly, requiring these documents may indicate to a survivor who is a recent immigrant that they do not qualify for the program, because they may not have these documents. However, immigration status should not be an eligibility criteria.  |
| **Require the survivor to complete or have a particular score on a risk (also may be called “danger,” “lethality") assessment?** | All assessments and services should be voluntary. Additionally, risk assessments that are developed for use with domestic violence victims in the criminal justice context are not always applicable in housing needs assessment settings for non-intimate partner sexual assault survivors, stalking survivors, dating violence survivors and even many domestic violence survivors. |
| **Require the survivor to complete or have a particular score on a housing assessment?** | While other housing funding may require a person to participate in certain housing assessments or obtain certain scores on housing assessments in order to be eligible for housing, OVW has no such requirement. Survivors should not be required to participate in housing assessments mandated by other funders or obtain certain scores on housing assessments for access to OVW housing and services.  |
| **Available in languages and formats that are accessible to all survivors?** | If a survivor prefers not to read and write in English as a primary language, programs should create meaningful language access. (For example, making materials available in other languages or formats like written Spanish, Korean, Braille; recorded spoken English or other languages) |

# Things to consider when creating the Intake Document:

**Does the form: Consider:**

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| **Allow room for the survivor to choose to not answer questions that are uncomfortable for them to answer?** | In order to reduce re-traumatizing questions, or ask questions that may make survivors feel pressure to share information that they would rather keep private, it is suggested that the form state that survivors only need to answer what they are comfortable answering and that housing is not contingent upon their answers. In addition advocates should let survivors know that they only need to answer what they are comfortable answering.  |
| **Create a space for conversation—one that can be completed in more than one sitting over time in pace with the survivor’s comfort?**  | In general, it is best practice to allow the intake to take place at the survivor’s pace. If the survivor wants to share information, then it should be done within their comfort level. It is also best practice to create the form as a dialogue to foster communication and not create a sense that the form is a series of check-boxes.  |
| **Ask case management/goal setting questions?***Employment/work/housing plans; questions around how the applicant would use the time in Transitional Housing* | The OVW T-Housing Model dictates that Case Management is voluntary. Therefore, a survivor’s intention to set/complete goals should not be woven into processes unless the survivor wants to participate in these services.  |
| **Require the survivor to disclose a great deal of personal information?**  | When conducting the intake, we suggest not requiring that the survivor to share personal information that is not necessary to orient them into the program and provide them services.  |
| **Require the survivor to submit identifying documents?** *Driver’s licenses/Identification cards; immigration documents; birth certificates; leases; housing search and applications* | In order to preserve the confidentiality and privacy of all survivors accessing OVW T-Housing, it is best practice to refrain from asking that survivors submit these documents, and to refrain from storing these documents in the survivor’s file. Lastly, requiring these documents may indicate to a survivor who is a recent immigrant that they do not qualify for the program, because they may not have these documents. However, immigration status should not be an eligibility criteria.  |
| **Require the survivor complete a certain risk or danger assessment or have a certain score on a risk ( also may be called “danger” or “lethality” assessment that are linked to requirements for certain services?** | All assessments and services should be voluntary. Additionally, risk assessments that are developed for use with domestic violence victims in the criminal justice context are not always applicable in housing needs assessment settings for non-intimate partner sexual assault survivors, stalking survivors, dating violence survivors and even many domestic violence survivors.  |
| **Require the survivor to complete or have a particular score on a housing assessment?** | While other housing funding may require a person to participate in certain housing assessments or obtain certain scores on housing assessments in order to be eligible for housing, OVW has no such requirement. Survivors should not be required to participate in housing assessments mandated by other funders or obtain certain scores on housing assessments for access to OVW housing and services.  |
| **Notify the survivor about the confidentiality of the contents of the documents and its limits within the OVW T-Housing program (either the victim services program that is receiving the OVW T-Housing grant or the OVW T-Housing program if the program is part of an umbrella organization)?** | It is part of a trauma-informed, voluntary services approach to inform survivors of confidentiality and is limits on all documents that they fill out.  |
| **Available in languages and formats that are accessible to all survivors?** | If a survivor prefers not to read and write in English as a primary language, programs should create meaningful language access. (For example, making materials available in other languages or formats like written Spanish, Korean, Braille; recorded spoken English or other languages) |

# Things to consider when creating the Welcome Packet:

**Does the form: Consider:**

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| --- | --- |
| **Include language that gives the tone that services are voluntary, and that the survivor is in control of their journey?**  | Replacing words like “encouraged,” “suggested,” or “recommended” with “available,” “optional,” or “offered.” |
| **Include language that states or implies that a survivor has to follow certain rules or they may face consequences if they don’t?**  | Determining if the policy fits within the terms that OVW outlines when a survivor can be asked to leave the transitional housing program (violence, illegal behavior, use of illegal drugs on-site). Participants cannot be asked to leave if they do not participate in case management; do not pay program fees; refuse to disclose personally identifying information; do not return by curfew or request overnights; disclose the location of the transitional housing units; have visitors; disclose drug/alcohol use.  |
| **Outline what the survivor can expect from staff?**  | Including language that explains the importance placed on confidentiality, respect, participant autonomy, and an array of services that are available for survivors to use whenever they want to.  |
| **Does the policy require certain practices in the name of confidentiality?**  | Reworking language and policies that state: survivors cannot have visitors, require that survivors are picked up and dropped off a certain distance away, require that a survivor not use technology while on-site.  |
| **Require a fee, rental payments, or a graduated step-down assistance plan?**  | The OVW grant does not require that participants have or acquire an income while they reside in the Transitional Housing program. As a result, any budgeting, fees or rental payments should be done with the survivor’s financial situation in mind. The survivor should share with the program how much of their income, if any, they are able to give toward program fees/rent.  |
| **Are the policies inclusive for all survivors?**  | VAWA requires that service providers offer equitable services to all survivors of violence regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or religion. All policies should be inclusive, and not imply that you only serve women in heterosexual relationships.  |
| **Require or impose participation in an in-house savings program?**  | Finding alternative options for the survivor if they are interested in opening a bank account or operating a savings plan. It is recommended that programs do not collect money directly from survivors for savings plans.  |
| **Available in languages and formats that are accessible to all survivors?** | If a survivor prefers not to read and write in English as a primary language, programs should create meaningful language access. (For example, making materials available in other languages or formats like written Spanish, Korean, Braille; recorded spoken English or other languages) |

# Things to consider when creating the Goal Planning sheet:

**Does the form: Consider:**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Include language that gives the tone that services are voluntary, and that the survivor is in control of their journey?**  | Replacing words like “encouraged,” “suggested,” or “recommended” with “available,” “optional,” or “offered.”  |
| **Include time-frames or language that recommends another meeting be conducted in the next 30, 60, or 90 days to check the survivor’s progress?**  | We strongly suggest that programs allow the survivor to dictate a time-frame, if that is something that the survivor wants to explore. Time-frames can discourage a survivor from pursuing the goal if the time-frame has passed or is fast approaching and the survivor hasn’t yet completed the goal.  |
| **Offer suggestions or topic areas for a survivor to choose from?**  | It is recommended that the goal sheet be as empty as possible, as to allow the survivor the opportunity to describe and list any goals they have. A survivor may choose to pursue a goal that is entirely unrelated to housing, employment, or education, and that is okay.  |
| **Does the form suggest that case management is mandatory, or necessary in order for the survivor to be successful?** | Case management is considered a voluntary and optional service that is offered as needed at the survivor’s request.  |
| **Notify the survivor about the confidentiality of the contents of the documents and its limits within the OVW T-Housing program (either the victim services program that is receiving the OVW T-Housing grant or the OVW T-Housing program if the program is part of an umbrella organization)?** | It is part of a trauma-informed, voluntary services approach to inform survivors of confidentiality and is limits on all documents that they fill out.  |
| **Available in languages and formats that are accessible to all survivors?** | If a survivor prefers not to read and write in English as a primary language, programs should create meaningful language access. (For example, making materials available in other languages or formats like written Spanish, Korean, Braille; recorded spoken English or other languages) |