

## **Best Practices for Setting Eligibility Criteria in Transitional housing Programs**

Determination of acceptance into Transitional Housing should be made on a case by case basis, based on minimal criteria. Having an effective set of criteria in place can ensure consistency and minimize making inappropriate decisions based on subjective feelings or hunches. The following should be kept in mind when determining program eligibility criteria:

1. The organization's mission and program goals,
2. The needs of the community and the people accessing your services, and
3. The funder's requirements and purpose of the program.

The Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) has created the following eligibility criteria for the Transitional Housing Grant Program.

Applicant must be:

- A survivor of domestic and/or sexual violence, dating violence or stalking;
- In need of housing as a result of domestic and/or sexual violence, dating violence, or stalking;
- Eighteen years old or (legally) emancipated minor;
- Willing and desiring to participate in Transitional Housing and meet with staff on a mutually-determined schedule;
- Willing to create an individualized safety plan, with the assistance of Transitional Housing staff; and
- Able to safely\* live independently, without access to staff or support 24-hours per day, 7 days per week.

Should your program consider additional criteria based on the program's mission and who you said you'd serve in your grant application, it can be helpful to consider the questions below in order to make that determination.

- What does the program funding dictate, with regards to who must (or who cannot) be served?
- What is the stated purpose of the housing program?
- Who in the community (organization, individuals) is making the most referrals to the housing program?
- What are the common trends, with regards to needs and requested services?

While your organization may not have the capacity to address all of a survivor's potential needs, community partnerships and collaborations will be an important aspect in filling those gaps. It is important to avoid screening out survivors solely based on individual needs that your program does not think it can meet. This is where your Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) partnerships may be a strong resource.

## Considerations

Many programs set eligibility based upon the program's own definition of success in fear of failing or not meeting funder expectations, and as a result only screen in survivors who are believed to be the most 'motivated' or those who have already proven themselves 'successful'.

One example is setting eligibility criteria based on previous stays in an emergency shelter and/or based on the survivor's behavior in shelter. Both of these criteria assume that survivors who are accepted into shelter and subsequently follow the rules and 'work towards their goals' are more appropriate for transitional housing. These assumptions are based on the program's perceptions about which survivors are least difficult to serve; or which have the fewest barriers and obstacles; or who are most likely meet the program's ultimate definition of 'success' (for example, permanent housing). In short, acceptance decisions should not be made based on assumptions, but instead based on some basic pre-set eligibility criteria.

A program's success will of course be in part defined by outcomes, usually specified by the funder. *But it must also be defined by the survivor.* Transitional housing programs should define program success by *what the program accomplished on behalf of the survivor or in partnership with the survivor; what services, information and assistance were provided and the manner in which they were provided.* For example:

- Did the survivor get what they needed from the program?
- Did the survivor have a positive experience? Did they feel respected and valued?
- Did the program do everything it could to help this person reach *their* goals?

When success is reframed in this way, it becomes clearer that ensuring program success is not based on screening out the survivors with the most needs, or those who have not yet proven themselves successful. *When success is defined differently for each survivor and her experience in the program, it can be met regardless of what a survivor's specific goals or capabilities.*

## The Bottom Line

Funding for housing programs is limited. As such, programs are always attempting to utilize all resources wisely. This is a necessary and admirable approach in any non-profit organization. However, we must be careful not to expend resources only for those we determine 'deserving'. *The goal is to help survivors.* The role of the program is not to determine in advance who deserves help or who will be the most successful, based on our own definition of success.



Eligibility should be straight-forward, transparent, and clearly defined. Consider the following while determining eligibility criteria:

- Be as broad and inclusive as possible.
- Examine referrals sources. For example, are referrals only accepted from the organization's own shelter or does the program do outreach to other organizations, or women on the streets? Are survivors allowed to self-refer?
- Minimize the application and interview process and make all paperwork as user-friendly as possible. Overly long or burdensome processes may alienate survivors and prevent them from seeking needed services. Streamline the process by considering - what questions do we need to ask, and what is not relevant to determining eligibility criteria?

