

Determination of acceptance into the Transitional Housing Program should be based on minimal criteria. Having an effective set of criteria in place can ensure consistency and minimize inappropriate decisions based on subjectivity. The following criteria should be used when determining program eligibility:

1. The organization's mission and program goals,
2. The needs of the community and the people accessing 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 Program.

Applicant must be:

- ◆ A survivor of domestic violence, sexual assault, dating violence or stalking;
- ◆ Currently homeless as a result of domestic violence, sexual assault, dating violence or stalking.
- ◆ Eighteen years old or (legally) emancipated minor.

Should the program consider additional criteria based on the mission and the identified target population in the grant application, it can be helpful to consider the questions below to make that determination.

- What does the program funding dictate regarding who must 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, regarding the needs and requested services of survivors?

It is important to note that while the program may have an identified target population, the program cannot exclude individuals that seek services who are not part of the identified target population.

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 based on individual needs that the program does not believe it can meet. This is where the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and partnerships are a strong resource.

It is important to let all survivors interested in applying for your transitional housing know that the program is not staffed 24-hours, 7-days a week. This means they may not have access to staff in instances of emergency. Survivors that have a Personal Care Assistant (PCA) cannot be denied from the program due to this need and must be welcomed to apply for the program.

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 to meet the program's ultimate definition of 'success' (for example, permanent housing). In short, acceptance decisions should not be based on assumptions, but on eligibility criteria.

A program's success will be in part defined by outcomes, but it must also be *defined by the survivor*. Transitional housing programs should define program success by what the program has accomplished *on behalf of the survivor or in partnership with the survivor*; services, information and assistance, 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 their experience in the program is valued individually, program success can be met regardless of a survivor's specific goals or capabilities.*

The Bottom Line

Funding for housing programs is limited. Programs are always attempting to use all resources wisely. This is a necessary and admirable approach in any non-profit organization. However, care must be applied to ensure that programs do not expend resources only for those deemed '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, and clearly defined. Consider the following while determining eligibility criteria:

- Be as broad and inclusive as possible.

Best Practices for Setting Eligibility Criteria in Transitional Housing Programs

- Examine referrals sources (i.e., are referrals only accepted from the organization's own shelter or does the program do outreach to other organizations? Are survivors allowed to self-refer?)
- Minimize the application process and make all paperwork as user-friendly as possible. Overly long or complicated processes may alienate survivors and prevent them from seeking services.