Creating a safe and welcoming physical environment should be one of the primary concerns of any trauma-informed victim services agency. Staff should consider how someone who has experienced trauma might receive the shelter's services. Abuse can affect how a person feels about and interacts with the world; for programs serving survivors of domestic violence, it is vital to consider the physical environment that you are providing survivors to live and interact within.

Consider specific areas of the shelter, such as bathrooms and bedrooms, which can be particularly triggering for survivors. Is there poor lighting, a lack of privacy, or a lack of control over their personal space in these areas? Does the shelter as a whole have adequate building security? These problems can cause feelings of fear and helplessness in survivors experiencing them.

Advocates should also be aware that trauma has often occurred in the context of shelter services themselves. Physically and emotionally coercive practices, forcing clients to partake in involuntary services, strict and often arbitrary 'house rules', and other interactions that trigger trauma-related reactions are still far too common in both residential and non-residential victim service agencies.

> An important reminder is that: "The environment we create communicates our beliefs about the people we serve."
>
> *(National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma, and Mental Health, 2011)*

Advocates should begin the process of evaluating the agency's physical space by thinking of times and spaces in which they felt comfortable and welcome. We want to give survivors that same sense of welcome and the feeling that the environment has been created in a way that is comfortable for them. Consider the things that you do to make yourself comfortable when you

are traveling. We often carry with us, whether in wallets or phones, images of our loved ones; we play music that is familiar and enjoyable; we may even bring a pillow or blanket from home. We are practicing self-care and stress management when we do those things. Survivors come to shelter in the midst of great stress and trauma, and they are often without many of the things they would normally use to calm and care for themselves. Providing a space that is physically safe and comfortable is an important part of easing this transition between home and shelter.

We can create this type of space within shelter in many ways including selecting art, décor and books that reflect the cultures of the communities we serve, and arranging the physical environment to accommodate a wide range of interactions and behaviors. Program staff should recognize that survivors might want quiet spaces as well as spaces for conversation and movement, and that noisy or very cluttered environments may be unsettling to some survivors. Considering the diverse ways you can use space helps to communicate that a wide range of people are welcomed in your program.

When we provide spaces for survivors to choose how to interact with the world, we are sending the message that we support survivors emotionally as well as physically. This does not have to be a special or financial burden on shelters; a 'quiet' space can be nothing more than a quiet corner of a larger room, set aside for survivors to use to restore a feeling of calm. Creating this type of space can be as simple as a comfortable chair, low lighting, a door or privacy screen that can be opened or closed, and a source of quiet music. Shelters might choose to add plants or flowers, calming nature scenes, a soft throw blanket, a stuffed animal to hold, or even a space and supplies for writing, reading, prayer, or meditation. Different things will be soothing to different survivors, and offering a small variety of ways to utilize the 'quiet' space can be helpful.

Transparency and trust are other key elements in creating emotionally and physically safe environments. This includes ensuring that expectations and intentions for shelter living and access to services are clear rather than hidden. Shelters should provide clear and simple information about plans and expectations. An example is sharing the schedule of upcoming classes and events that will take place in the shelter, anything from support group meetings to movie nights and classes. Sharing this schedule at the same time each week in a location that is open and accessible to all residents, e.g. posted in large print on a bulletin board in the shelter kitchen, can help residents to feel comfortable and confident in the space. Remember that during the time that survivors are residents in the shelter, it is their home. No one likes unplanned visitors and events happening in their home. This transparency also involves collaborating with survivors by soliciting opinions, comments, questions, and observations regarding their experiences with shelter services and environment.

Creating collaboration and an open dialogue includes noticing and responding to issues as they arise. For example, you may notice a shift in the energy within the shelter when new residents enter or others leave, or someone may raise concerns about the shelter environment, resident interactions, or staff behavior. These are opportunities to respond respectfully and transparently, and in ways that do not create dynamics of silencing and minimizing. Addressing these concerns may include naming the discomfort and asking residents to come together with staff to share and discuss what is working and what is not.

Each survivor has their own communication needs related to physical and emotional safety. Some may find it reassuring to have clear directions from a staff member with authority and expertise, some may need safe spaces to vent their feelings and have their emotions validated, others may seek a quiet space that allows them to de-stress and recharge without having to interact with others. An important aspect of helping survivors feel in control is ensuring that they can ask for what they need and express opinions even if they are different to what other survivors are doing or seeking.

Several wonderful self-assessment tools are available to help your organization evaluate its physical environment. Two of the best are:

Creating Accessible, Culturally Relevant, Domestic Violence and Trauma-informed Agencies A Self Reflection Tool
http://www.nationalcenterdvtraumamh.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/ACDVTI-Self-Reflection-Tool_NCDVTMH.pdf

Building Cultures of Care: A Guide for Sexual Assault Services
Programshttp://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/publications_nsvrc_guides_building-cultures-of-care.pdf

A welcoming shelter environment includes:

- ✓ Sufficient space for comfort and privacy
- ✓ Absence of violent or sexual materials or posters
- ✓ Staff that are available and trained to intervene in intrusive or harassing behaviors
- ✓ Staff that clearly explain and model policies of confidentiality and safety
- ✓ Staff that give clear information and are consistent and predictable in all interactions with survivors
- ✓ Staff that give survivors as much control over their experience and choices as possible
- ✓ Survivors who are encouraged to set boundaries and limits and ask for accommodations as needed
- ✓ Staff that set clear and consistent boundaries between themselves and clients
- ✓ Staff that respect survivor's ownership of the shelter as residents who are making a home (however temporary)
- ✓ Survivors who are encouraged to offer their feedback and evaluation of services and space
- ✓ Dedicated 'quiet' spaces
- ✓ Safe spaces in- or outside for movement

- ✓ Areas for creativity, supplies for writing, art, and/or crafts
- ✓ Support and space for reflection and self-care for both residents and staff
- ✓ Décor that is welcoming and inclusive of diverse survivors, including those of different faiths and cultures
- ✓ Books and reading materials that reflect diverse interests and readers, including those in under- or inadequately-served communities
- ✓ Spaces for children to play and interact, as well as family friendly spaces
- ✓ Physical accessibility to those who with disabilities or mobility issues
- ✓ Safe and accessible parking and access to the building
- ✓ Signs that are clear, visible, and in multiple languages
- ✓ The agency is not using signs to convey rules or punitive messages
- ✓ Safety warning signs are well-made, easily visible and understandable
- ✓ Bathrooms that are available and accessible to individuals of varied abilities, genders, and body sizes, with doors that lock
- ✓ Living items, such as plants and fish tanks, incorporated into the decor
- ✓ Staff that ask survivors for permission before closing doors, touching survivors, etc.
- ✓ Interior and exterior spaces that are well lit
- ✓ Security systems that are in place
- ✓ Survivors are given access to private, lockable storage
- ✓ Survivors are given access to food and drinks

Privacy & Storage

Privacy is the state of being free from unwanted or undue intrusion or disturbance in one's private life or affairs. Privacy is a necessary component of shelter services because the lives of victims of violence are often defined by a lack of control. **Shelter residents need to be able to control the space they are living in.** Shelter locations are treated with the upmost confidentiality as part of organizational policy. However, by their very nature, shelter sites are

Shelter agencies are responsible for providing necessities to their residents without expectation of payment or contribution. These necessities include:

- Food staples for basic meals and snacks throughout the day
  - o While it may be necessary to store bulk food in areas that residents do not have access to, there should be a variety of basic food staples available to residents at all times.
  - o Agencies should be aware that they may encounter clients with health- or religion-related dietary needs, and should work to accommodate those.
  - o By providing a variety of staple foods, such as meats, rice, beans and other canned vegetables, bread, milk, and eggs agencies should be able to provide for the dietary needs of most residents.
- Toiletries and hygiene necessities
  - o This include menstrual hygiene products, shampoo, soap, deodorant, and other things residents may need in the normal course of their personal care.
- Clothing
  - o Agencies should keep on hand basic clothing staples in a variety of sizes and male and female styles.

frequented by a variety of people including staff members, volunteers, interns, clients, and their children.

When shelter residents feel that they have privacy when in their personal space and the ability to personalize where they are living, it is much easier for residents to develop a sense of belonging in the shelter. However, it is important to have public spaces as well as private. Communal spaces like the kitchen, living room, or areas utilized for smoking are places in which clients interact and relationships are developed.

To develop privacy in shelter, clients must know that their personal spaces (bedroom, bathroom, locked storage) will be treated with respect. That is why it is important to note that it is rarely acceptable to search clients' rooms, especially their personal belongings. Searches would only be permissible in the rare event that there is a safety issue that affects the whole shelter.

> It is crucial for shelters to have areas of privacy for clients to engage in activities such as counseling, legal advocacy, and making personal phone calls.

Shelters should always honor clients' confidentiality to the greatest extent possible. In communal living situations, this can pose a difficult barrier. However, it is important to note that discussing clients' information with other clients is not only a violation of confidentiality, but also an invasion of privacy. (See examples on handling common communal living problems on page 147.)

Agencies should provide a "locked space" (locked box, locker, or locking cabinet) for each adult resident to store medications and valuables. Each resident should be solely responsible for accessing their locked space, as this prevents staff from being seen as controlling or dispensing medication. Staff should never open or search this space while the resident is in shelter. Staying away from residents' "locked space" also helps to avoid accusations of theft made by clients toward staff or other residents, and gives survivors a sense of autonomy and security. You can find a model policy on the security of personal items on page 200.

Pets in Shelter

Pets are often overlooked when safety planning in domestic violence situations. However, companion animals are often threatened, hurt, and sometimes even killed in violent homes. Being unable to take a pet when leaving a violent situation can cause a survivor to delay leaving their abuser, therefore putting the survivor in danger over a longer period of time. If a survivor has been isolated from other people as a part of the abuse, a pet may be a source of comfort, emotional support, and in some cases even protection. People can form deep attachments to their animals, describing the relationship as "best friends", "a family member" or even as "my baby". By working with survivors to keep their animals safe, domestic violence programs are removing a barrier to reaching safety and allowing survivors to maintain the bond they have with their animal.

Assessment

Include questions about animals in your assessment of the survivor's situation. Begin with asking if the survivor has animals. While we typically think of cats and dogs as pets, it is possible that the survivor may have exotic animals or livestock that they are concerned about. How does the survivor describe the relationship with the animal: friend, child, just a pet? Knowing how the survivor views the relationship can help the advocate understand how high a priority the animal is to the survivor. Determine if the abuser has threatened, harmed or killed pets in the past. Help the survivor brainstorm potential housing situations for their animals such as with a family member, friend, or their veterinary clinic before accessing other services.

Safety Planning for Pets

If a survivor has the time and ability to do so safely, gathering some of the following materials can make bringing their animal with them easier:

- **Proof of Ownership**- because animals are considered property, having proof of ownership can be very helpful. This could be a bill of sale or adoption papers, or receipts from a veterinary clinic or pet store with the survivor's name on them to show that the survivor has been taking care of the animal, or even a note showing that the animal was a gift.
- **Veterinary records** and any medications the animal requires. Many boarding facilities require that vaccinations are up to date before taking in an animal, so having those records can expedite the process.
- **A leash or carrier.**
- **Food, food bowls, and a favorite toy or blanket.**

While having these items can make the transition easier, it is not mandatory for the survivor. Safety is always a survivor's top priority; they should leave the abusive situation with their pet even if there is no time to gather the suggested items above.

Additionally, as of 2007, pets may be included in an Order of Protection. You can find more information about this in Tennessee Code Annotated 36-3-606 (a) (9).

Housing Companion Animals

Ideally, survivors and their animals should be housed together. Each program needs to consider their circumstances when determining if and how this can be managed. Things to consider include: space availability, species and size limitations, who will be responsible for animal care, and managing things like allergies or fear of animals from other people in the shelter.

If it is not possible to house survivors' animals in the shelter, there are other ways in which the program can help survivors with pets. Some programs provide financial assistance directly to the survivor so the survivor can pay for boarding services for the animal. In other cases, domestic violence programs have developed relationships with veterinary clinics, boarding facilities, or animal rescues or shelters that will house animals at no cost for a limited period of time. Another option is that some programs have developed a network of foster homes that will house a survivor's animals.

Note that any shelter that is ADA compliant in housing service animals has already built the capacity for housing pets and companions animals. For more on service animals see page 20.
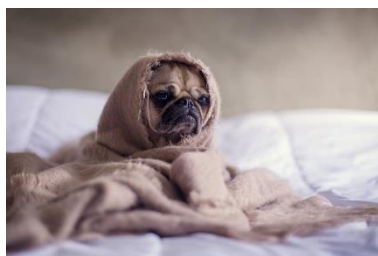
Case Study: Sheltering Pets, How One Agency Made it Work

In 2012, CEASE Inc. of Morristown, Tennessee received an American Kennel Club (AKC) grant to create a "pet safe" program for their domestic violence shelter. They leveraged the grant funds and secured in-kind support for a kennel construction project from their community. Their local Girls' Inc. donated the materials and labor to pour the concrete foundation for the kennel and their local no kill animal shelter, Noah's Arc, donated the shelter structure.

Once the shelter had the accommodations set up to accept pets, it was just a matter of integrating the pets into the shelter's existing assistance animal policy. CEASE Inc.'s policy now allows for all service, therapy, and comfort animals as well as pets. Pets, however, do not receive the same access to the shelter that service animals do. With the AKC grant money, CEASE Inc. is able to provide food, grooming and veterinarian services as needed for each animal.

Now that pets are allowed to be shletered with their owners at CEASE Inc., the shelter is able to provide safety to many more victims and their beloved pets. It is not without its challenges, however. It is often harder to move someone with a pet into permanent housing, or rehouse them to other shelters because of the pet.

You will find a modified copy of the CEASE Inc. Animal Policy on page 225.

Resources:

Tips for Creating a Welcoming Environment, National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma, and Mental Health, 2011; http://nationalcenterdvtraumamh.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Tipsheet_Welcoming-Environment_NCDVTMH_Aug2011.pdf

Practical Tips For Increasing Access To Services, National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma, and Mental Health, 2011; http://nationalcenterdvtraumamh.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Tipsheet_Practical-Strategies_NCDVTMH_Nov2011.pdf

Increasing Emotional Safety in Domestic Violence Shelters, National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma, and Mental Health, 2011; http://www.nationalcenterdvtraumamh.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/ConversationGuide_Inreasing-Emotional-Safety_NCDVTMH_Dec2011.pdf

Creating Accessible, Culturally Relevant, Domestic Violence and Trauma-informed Agencies A Self Reflection Tool, Accessing Safety and Recovery Initiative, 2012; http://www.nationalcenterdvtraumamh.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/ACDVTI-Self-Reflection-Tool_NCDVTMH.pdf

Building Cultures of Care: A Guide for Sexual Assault Services Programs, The National Sexual Assault Coalition Resource Sharing Project and the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2013; http://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/publications_nsvrc_guides_building-cultures-of-care.pdf

Tips for Enhancing Emotional Safety, National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma, and Mental Health, 2011; http://nationalcenterdvtraumamh.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Tipsheet_Emotional-Safety_NCDVTMH_Aug2011.pdf

Creating cultures of trauma-informed care (CCTIC): A self-assessment and planning protocol. Retrieved from the University of Iowa Carver College of Medicine, Fallot, R. D., & Harris, M. 2009; http://www.healthcare.uiowa.edu/icmh/documents/ CCTICSelf-AssessmentandPlanningProtocol0709.pdf

The eight key components of personal wellness. Retrieved from: Befriending Your Body, Hall, K, 2012; http://befriendingyourbody.com/the-8-key-components-of-personal-wellness/

Trauma-informed or trauma- denied: Principles and implementation of trauma-informed services for women, Journal of Community Psychology, Elliott, D. E., Bjelajac, P., Fallot, R. D., Markoff, L. S., & Reed, B.G., 2005

Safe Havens for Pets: Guidelines for Programs Sheltering Pets for Women Who Are Battered by Frank R. Ascione, Ph.D. http://www.vachss.com/guest_dispatches/ascione_safe_havens.pdf