

# Creating an Inclusive Culture

Tennessee Domestic Violence Shelter Best Practices Manual / Section I



**“An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity.” - Martin Luther King, Jr.**

**“We need to give each other the space to grow, to be ourselves, to exercise our diversity. We need to give each other space so that we may both give and receive such beautiful things as ideas, openness, dignity, joy, healing, and inclusion.” -Max de Pree**

“Difference is of the essence of humanity. Difference is an accident of birth and it should therefore never be the source of hatred or conflict. The answer to difference is to respect it. Therein lies a most fundamental principle of peace: respect for diversity.” -John Hume

People suffering from domestic violence are already vulnerable—and their chances for receiving the right kind of support are even more diminished if service providers do not have the adequate support, training, and resources to provide services that are responsive to their specific cultural and personal circumstances. This problem is compounded when the culture of the organization itself reflects some of the prejudices a survivor has experienced in other areas of their lives.

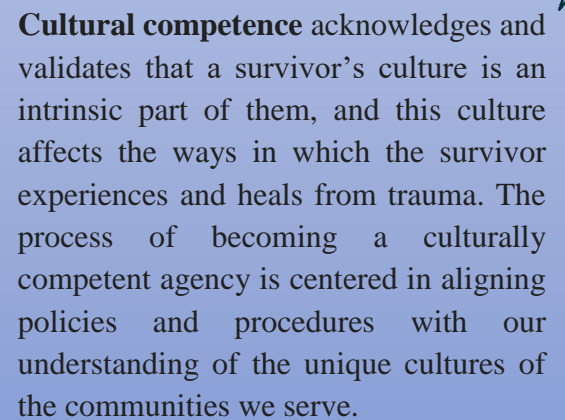
Organizations have a "culture" of policies, practices, and procedures that incorporate specific values, beliefs, assumptions, and customs both consciously and unconsciously. Organizational cultures largely echo mainstream culture, including an embrace of stereotypes, prejudices, and biases. Even the most progressive of organizational cultures may contain comprehensive cultural competence, so skill building is vital for all agencies to ensure that respectful and equal services are given to all survivors. A culturally competent organization brings together knowledge about different ethical and cultural groups and transforms that knowledge into standards, policies, and practices that make organizational culture inclusive.

## **There are four levels of cultural understanding-**

*Cultural knowledge* means that you know about some cultural characteristics, history, values, beliefs, and behaviors of another ethnic or cultural group.

*Cultural awareness* is the next stage of understanding - being open to the idea of changing cultural attitudes.

*Cultural sensitivity* is knowing that differences exist between cultures, but not assigning judgement to the differences (better or worse, right or wrong). Bringing staff from *awareness* to *sensitivity* can sometimes create conflict. Many people have strongly held beliefs and feelings about their own unique cultures and traditions, making it difficult not to see people from different cultures as ‘other,’ ‘strange,’ or ‘wrong’. This type of conflict is not always easy to manage; it is helpful to remind staff of their mission to serve survivors of all backgrounds completely and respectfully.



**Cultural competence** acknowledges and validates that a survivor’s culture is an intrinsic part of them, and this culture affects the ways in which the survivor experiences and heals from trauma. The process of becoming a culturally competent agency is centered in aligning policies and procedures with our understanding of the unique cultures of the communities we serve.

*Cultural competence* brings together all four levels of cultural understanding and is reflected in operational changes across the organization. A culturally competent organization has the capacity to bring into its system survivors of many backgrounds, beliefs, and cultures, and to work effectively with multi-cultural groups of residents to produce better outcomes.

## **Cultural Competency Tips-**

### **1. Distinguish when cultural explanations are pertinent.**

E.g., a rural shelter frames an immigrant woman’s reluctance to use common bathrooms as a function of her cultural attitudes toward nudity. However, the survivor’s need for privacy may not be related to culture at all. Instead of making an incorrect assumption based on culture a more relevant question may be ‘how is her desire for privacy during vulnerable moments related to the abuse she has experienced’. Many survivors have a greater need for privacy as a part of their desire for safety, which has little to do with cultural mores around nudity.

### **2. Do not accept culture as an explanation for domestic violence.**

Cultural devaluations of women differ in degree from place to place, but are used to the same end across the world, to justify domestic violence. This does not only affect women; rigid gender roles also make it more difficult for male survivors to disclose the abuse they have experienced, and for LGBTQ+ survivors to receive help.

What advocates should be conscious of are the ways in which gender relations are prescribed in a survivor’s culture, how interventions may challenge traditional roles, how domestic violence is treated within that particular culture, and what additional threats or risks (e.g. deportation) may follow when survivors break from tradition.

### **3. Use an understanding of cultural differences to prompt better advocacy, not confirm or perpetuate stereotypes.**

For example, burning a woman to death or shooting her dead – one seems more horrific than the other based on what people are exposed to in their own culture, but in fact both acts are equally horrific. The method of killing does not make one group of men more horribly violent than the other, although our stereotypes may make us think so. We all hold stereotypes, the important thing is to recognize them, set them aside, and stay client-focused.

Community Tool Box has created a free resource manual for building cultural competency across organizations and communities. It is available at <http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/culture/cultural-competence/culturally-competent-organizations/main>



### **4. Understand the impact that institutional systems have on survivors.**

For instance, fear of deportation often prevents immigrant survivors from seeking help from law enforcement. Fear of losing custody of his children may prevent a gay male survivor from seeking the help of child protective services because of institutional prejudice that has embraced the false, damaging stereotypes that gay parents are ‘bad for children’ or ‘many gay men are child molesters.’

An advocate’s cultural competency is critical to a survivor’s well-being. Cross-systems advocacy, when two or more victim services or social systems work together, is vital. Advocates must not only prepare survivors to navigate local systems, but be willing to challenge damaging biases and push for cultural competency across the institutions they work with.

#### **Resources:**

*Building Culturally Competent Organizations*, Community Tool Box, <http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/culture/cultural-competence/culturally-competent-organizations/main>

*Activist Dialogues: How Domestic Violence and Child Welfare Systems Impact Women of Color and Their Communities*, Family Violence Prevention Fund (2005)

*Domestic Violence at the Intersections of Race, Class, and Gender*, Sokoloff & Dupont, *Violence Against Women*, 11(1), 2005

*Family Violence in a Cultural Perspective: Defining, Understanding, and Combating Abuse*, Malley-Morrison & Hines, 2003

*Intersecting Child Welfare, Substance Abuse, and Family Violence: Culturally Competent Approaches*, Fong, Hendricks, & McRoy, 2006

*Cultural Competency in California’s Domestic Violence Field*, Teng & Warrier, 2012

*Cultural & Gender Competency*, Asian Pacific Institute on Gender Based Violence,  
<http://www.api-gbv.org/organizing/cultural-competency.php>

*Cultural Competency Standards for Programs Serving Victims of Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault and Other Crimes in Oregon*, Merlo & Glick, 2006

*Culture Handbook*, Family Violence Prevention Fund, Warrier, 2005,  
<http://www.futureswithoutviolence.org/userfiles/file/ImmigrantWomen/Culture%20Handbook.pdf>