

# Voluntary Services: Theory & Definitions

*Tennessee Domestic Violence Shelter Best Practices Manual / Section III*

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“Receipt of supportive services under FVPSA will be voluntary. No condition will be applied to receipt of emergency shelter as described in Section 10408(d) (2).”

*(Family Violence Prevention and Services Act (FVPSA) Reauthorization Legislation, 2010)*

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Voluntary services, as opposed to mandatory services, means that clients do not need to complete a program or take part in other services as a condition of receiving housing. Services are offered based on each person’s specific needs.

A voluntary services model is one piece of the puzzle in creating a trauma-informed organization. This model recognizes that every survivor experiences and reacts to trauma differently, and so each survivor will want and need a unique set of services and interventions. A voluntary services model empowers each survivor to make their own decision about which services will benefit them, and how and when to receive those services.

Many agencies worry that voluntary participation will lower their participation numbers long-term. However, studies of this model have shown that, after an initial dip, participation numbers gradually and consistently *increase* over time as supportive services change to meet the needs of the survivors being served. The programs studied experienced a marked increase in both the amount and quality of resident participation.

**Some changes that may occur organically over time with the services shelters offer include:**

- Support groups and classes designed with the needs of those currently residing in shelter in mind
- Alternative wellness groups
  - Yoga, walking, gardening, etc.
- Changing programs based on staff and volunteer expertise as well as client feedback
- Client-led classes or groups based on clients’ unique skills and interests
- Programs finding ways to provide childcare during classes and workshops

Remember- it is still important for staff to plan and deliver supportive services even if attendance is voluntary. Organization leadership should encourage staff creativity and client input when planning classes and groups. Agencies should also take time to re-evaluate what the success of supportive services looks like, and how it can be measured in trauma-informed ways. For instance, empower survivors to choose which services are most meaningful and impactful for themselves and their families, and then pay attention to trends in attendance and feedback!

Shelters may worry that residents’ choices not to partake in supportive services may negatively affect their progress toward goals set during needs assessment, for instance, securing housing or successfully attending parenting classes as a condition of child custody. It is difficult for many advocates to step back and allow clients to make choices they disagree with without taking on a ‘parent’, ‘teacher’, or even ‘boss’ role. Advocates often don these roles in order to convince or coerce clients into changing their

choices, or partaking in services the way the advocate thinks is best. The voluntary services model does not mean that advocates cannot have open and honest conversations with residents about their choices, but it does mean that the choices are to be made by the clients themselves, and that those choices should be respected by shelter staff. Survivors should be empowered to make their own choices, even if the advocate disagrees.

**Resources:**

Voluntary Services Learning Module, Virginia Department of Social Services,  
[https://www.dss.virginia.gov/files/division/cvs/ofv/grantees/learning\\_modules/vs\\_module\\_01.pdf](https://www.dss.virginia.gov/files/division/cvs/ofv/grantees/learning_modules/vs_module_01.pdf)

Domestic Violence Shelter Services: A Review of the Empirical Evidence, Sullivan, 2012,  
<http://www.dvevidenceproject.org/wp-content/uploads/ShelterResearchSummary.pdf>

Standards for Domestic Violence Programs, Missouri Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence, 2016, <https://www.mocadsv.org/FileStream.aspx?FileID=417>

Understanding Voluntary Services, NNEDV, <https://nnedv.org/mdocs-posts/understanding-the-basic-of-the-voluntary-services-approach/>

Transitional Supportive Housing Programs: Battered Women's Perspectives and Recommendations, Melbin, Sullivan, and Cain, 2003, <https://scholars.opb.msu.edu/en/publications/transitional-supportive-housing-programs-battered-womens-perspect-3>

Voluntary Participation in Services: Promoting Trauma-Informed Care for Survivors of Domestic Violence, California Partnership to End Domestic Violence, <http://www.cpedv.org/overview/voluntary-participation-services>

Sustaining Housing, a Voluntary Service Approach,  
[http://b.3cdn.net/naeh/f5ecd52d9e48c8c301\\_0lm6vuk14.pdf](http://b.3cdn.net/naeh/f5ecd52d9e48c8c301_0lm6vuk14.pdf)