

HOW SHELTERS DECIDE TO INTEGRATE ALL GENDERS

TIPSHEET #2

More than half of the gender-integrated shelters that FORGE interviewed in 2015 initially served only women and made the decision to become gender-integrated years later, with no mandate to do so. There are a number of different reasons for why shelters make such a big change.

7 Motivating Factors For Gender Integration In Shelters

1. Equity.

When a shelter's leadership and staff have a value of serving all those in need, integrating people of all genders becomes the right and moral thing to do—just as providing services to people of all sexualities, abilities, citizenship statuses, races and ethnicities, socioeconomic statuses, parenting situations, and so on is the right and equitable thing to do.

2. A desire to serve unmet needs.

Many shelters actively seek to address unmet community needs; some have a regular practice of identifying populations present in the community yet not represented in the shelter. For shelters that only serve women, it often becomes clear that men, transgender and gender non-binary people, and/or lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals are populations that are experiencing intimate partner violence and other abuses but have limited or no access to support services.

People who are marginalized because of gender identity, gender expression, and/or sexual orientation (in addition to ability, race and ethnicity, class, citizenship status, and more) are often more vulnerable to intimate partner violence because of factors like lack of family support or safety nets, increased isolation, and vulnerability to having their identity "outed" or disclosed without their consent.

“ Gender-integrated shelters: IN THEIR OWN WORDS

I just wonder how other shelters can turn people away, especially when we're supposed to be non-judgmental. They're abused! They need help. Doesn't matter if they're gay or trans.

“ Gender-integrated shelters: IN THEIR OWN WORDS

When we overhauled the residential program ... we started asking what services do we have for men? For men with kids? For people with disabilities? ... We didn't even include women with male children over the age of 12. We recognized that that exclusion made people make impossible choices

3. Increased requests.

Many shelters are motivated to make the change to gender-integrated services because of an increase in requests from men, or an increase in the number of trans people who come through their doors. The awareness that there are survivors who have nowhere to go is very often the factor that pushes shelters to expand their services.

4. An expansion or move to a new facility.

When a shelter has the opportunity to expand its building(s) or move to a new facility, it affords the chance to revisit admission criteria and potentially make changes.

5. A partnership with a community LGBT organization.

Alliances between domestic violence shelters and local LGBT organizations can be incredibly impactful, particularly because so many LGBT people are unlikely to trust mainstream shelter services. Shelters that form partnerships with LGBT organizations often quickly increase access to trans people and non-trans men and are supported in their efforts by their new allies.

6. Advocates who push for change.

Integrating people of all genders into shelter services can come about because of the efforts of a single person, whether someone inside the shelter—such as a staff person, board member, or resident—or someone outside the shelter, such as a concerned community member or activist. When a single staff member calls attention to the need for change, that person can educate others and open minds to possibilities that might never have otherwise been considered.

7. Emerging populations.

Some shelters are theoretically open to serving trans people, but haven't done any preparatory work to make sure their services are fully welcoming and inclusive of the unique needs that trans people bring. Once a trans survivor shows up, it can quickly become clear that the shelter isn't prepared, which in a best-case scenario leads to changes to create more access and inclusion for trans people.

“ Gender-integrated shelters: IN THEIR OWN WORDS

We were okay with trans women to come into shelter ... [but] we used to not allow [trans men] clients in because in general, the client had to “look female” in order to gain access. When we got our new building, we began serving the trans and male community.

+ POTENTIAL PARTNERSHIPS

- FORGE directory of trans support groups, trans-competent providers, and LGBT anti-violence programs

<http://forge-forward.org/directories>

- GLAAD list of trans organizations, programs, and resources:

www.glaad.org/transgender/resources

- CenterLink directory of local LGBT community centers:

www.lgbtcenters.org

In addition, the number of people who openly identify as non-binary is rapidly growing. Among twenty gender-inclusive shelters surveyed by FORGE, staff estimated that they had served more than 250 non-binary survivors over their history. There are many people who are uncomfortable in settings that force them to choose between female- or male-specific options, and these survivors are unlikely to even attempt to access a shelter that is sex-segregated.

Whatever the reason shelters ultimately decide to change how they do business, those that take the step of integrating their services to support people of all genders provide a lifeline to people in need who may well have nowhere else to turn.

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