Transitioning Our Shelters: Making Homeless Shelters Safe for Transgender People

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ABSTRACT. Most homeless shelters in the United States are segregated by sex, with placement based on assumptions about a person’s gender. As a result, transgender youth and adults, who identify as or express a gender different from their birth sex, can experience extreme difficulties in obtaining adequate and safe shelter. Many shelters are physically unsafe for transgender people, fail to provide adequate protections for their privacy, or do not respect their autonomy to define their own gender identity. This article provides information about transgender people, their experiences with poverty and homelessness, and how shelters can be made safe and welcoming for them.

KEYWORDS. Transgender, homeless, shelter, homeless shelters

Most homeless shelters and emergency shelter systems in the United States are segregated by sex, and placements are determined using assumptions about a person’s gender. As a result, transgender youth and adults, who identify as or express a gender that is different from their birth sex, can experience extreme difficulties in obtaining adequate and safe shelter. Not only are transgender people frequently asked to endure the emotional injury of being classified as the gender with which they do not identify, but many shelters are physically unsafe for transgender people or do not provide adequate protections for their privacy. Finally, some transgender people are turned away from shelters, either because of prejudice or because a shelter does not think it can accommodate them.

Because of the many problems faced by transgender people seeking shelter, in October 2003 the National Coalition for the Homeless adopted a non-discrimination resolution that explicitly protects people on the basis of gender identity and expression. Realizing that shelters need more guidance than just a non-discrimination policy, the authors, in conjunction with the National Coalition for the Homeless and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, present this article for those who wish to learn more about transgender people, their experiences with poverty, and how shelters can be made safe and welcoming for them.

Well-meaning shelter administrators are often unsure on how to provide safe shelter for transgender people and integrate them into the
sex-segregated shelter population. The good news is that making a few minor but important changes in policy and living arrangements can make transgender residents safer and more comfortable, while also maintaining personal privacy and safety for all shelter residents. Many shelters across North America have successfully implemented policies that make their shelters transgender-friendly. The recommendations in this publication are derived from policies implemented in Boston,2 the District of Columbia, San Francisco, and Toronto.3 The experiences of shelters in these cities were gathered from discussions with practitioners, trainers, and advocates.4

**TRANSGENDER PEOPLE, HOMELESSNESS, AND THE STRUGGLE TO FIND SAFE SHELTER**

Any successful effort to end homelessness must recognize the diversity of individuals who find themselves homeless and attempt to understand their varied experiences and needs. Transgender people are, unfortunately, over-represented in the homeless population and, though diverse as a group, they share many unique needs that are often misunderstood by those who provide social services for the poor and homeless. This section provides basic information about transgender identity and why transgender people are particularly vulnerable to poverty and homelessness.

Accurate data about this understudied population is scarce, leaving unknown the exact number of transgender individuals who are homeless and in need of services. A 2002 study reported that possibly 35% of homeless youth are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (Cochran, Stewart, Glinzler, & Cauce, 2002, pp.773-776). Other studies show that one in five transgender people are in need of or at risk of needing shelter assistance (Risser & Shelton, 2002; Minter & Daley, 2003). Despite a lack of definitive population estimates, it is known that transgender people are requesting shelter in large numbers.5 For example, 4.3% of the people who request services from Atlanta’s largest male-only shelter are transgender women not allowed in women’s shelters (Smith, 2003). Hal Cato, the Executive Director of Nashville’s largest homeless shelter for youth, Oasis, estimates that approximately one percent of their requests for emergency assistance come from transgender youth (personal communication, November 2003).
Who Are Transgender People? The Basics

Transgender is an “umbrella” term used to describe a wide range of identities and experiences and is used to refer to the many types of people whose appearance or characteristics are perceived to be gender atypical. Every person has a gender identity—an internal sense of being male, female, or something else—and a gender expression—the way this identity is expressed through dress, appearance, and behavior. For many transgender people, their gender identity and/or expression do not match what society expects based on their birth sex.

Some people may identify as transgender but not fall into one of the common subcategories discussed below, while others may appear transgender but not consider themselves to be transgender. Thus, it is important that one does not label a person transgender based on one’s perceptions, but instead use the words the individual uses to describe him or herself. Following this rule, “transgender women” refers to people who were born male but now live as women (also known as male-to-female or MTF) and “transgender men” refers to people who were born female but now live as men (female-to-male–FTM).

Some transgender people are transsexual, identifying psychologically and emotionally as a gender they feel is different from the sex they were assigned at birth. Transsexuals may desire to modify their bodies through hormones and/or sexual reassignment surgery in order to bring their physical appearance in line with their gender identity. Many people who would like surgery to alter their bodies cannot afford it or are not medically able to have surgery, while others may choose not to have surgery. The process of identifying and living in one’s new gender is called “transitioning” and it may or may not include physical and biological changes.

Cross-dressers are people who dress in clothing stereotypically worn by the other sex, usually on a part-time or limited basis, but who have no intent to change gender. “Transvestite,” a term sometimes used to refer to cross-dressers, is considered by many to be derogatory.

Androgynous people and those who identify as “genderqueer” have gender identities that do not fit neatly within the stereotypical male-female dichotomy; they may identify as neither male nor female, or as a bit of both. Other terms used by genderqueer people include “femme queens,” “butch bois,” “drags,” “bi-gendered,” or “two-spirit” (a Native American term). The general term “gender non-conforming” refers to people whose gender expressions do not match stereotypes of how girls/women or boys/men are “supposed to” look and act.
Although quantitative research on transgender populations is scarce, anecdotal evidence from service providers indicates that there is a large and growing population of young people who are challenging gender norms and expectations and coming out as transgender at earlier ages, often being kicked out of their family homes as a result. Gender identities that are neither entirely male nor entirely female are much more common among young transgender people. As these youth develop their own non-traditional identities, adults may have a difficult time understanding how to interact with them, but respecting a young person’s identity is essential to building communication and trust. A shelter can meet the needs of transgender youth using many of the same approaches offered in this guide for transgender adults.

A condition that is distinct from transgender identity but sometimes confused with it is intersex. Intersex people are born with sex chromosomes, external genitalia, or an internal reproductive system that are not considered “standard” for either male or female, a condition that can become evident at birth, at puberty, or later in life. Often, surgery is performed on intersex newborns in an effort to “correct” ambiguous genitalia; such surgeries are now strongly opposed by many in the intersex community. People with intersex conditions may be among shelter residents and have an increased need for privacy and safety, just as transgender people do. Although not the focus of this article, most of these recommendations will help intersex people be safer in shelters as well.7

The definitions provided above are designed to make readers familiar with some basic concepts and terms often used in relation to transgender people, but the list is not exhaustive. No two people experience their gender the same way, just as most non-transgender people do not meet all gender expectations and stereotypes perfectly. Thus, one may encounter someone who identifies as transgender in a way other than those mentioned above and uses different classifications and terminology for his or herself. In addition, language and terms relating to gender identity and expression are constantly changing and may vary across socio-economic, racial, and religious groups. Despite the variety of transgender identities and experiences, the basics for how to treat transgender people respectfully and to ensure they have safe shelter remain essentially the same.

It is also important to realize that sexual orientation and gender identity/expression are distinct concepts. Sexual orientation refers to a person’s romantic and sexual attraction to others, while gender identity refers to a person’s internal sense of being male, female, or something else. A transgender person may identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or het-
erososexual. Having said this, it should be noted that some cultures (some Native American cultures, for example) do not draw such a clear distinction between transgender people and gay and lesbian people. Also, in the United States and other countries, transgender activists and lesbian and gay activists have sometimes worked together or identified themselves as facing a similar struggle.

Transgender People and Poverty

Transgender people are disproportionately represented in the homeless population because of the frequent discrimination they face at home, in school, and on the job. In addition to being vulnerable to poverty, the obstacles encountered by all homeless people—protecting oneself from crime, or attempting to access social services, for example—can be especially difficult for transgender people. Poverty also means the inability to access transgender-related healthcare such as hormones, counseling, and sex reassignment procedures (almost all of which are not covered by insurance providers in the United States).

Transgender people frequently lose their jobs when employers learn of their transgender status and have difficulty concealing their identity from potential employers or finding employment as openly transgender, leading to chronic underemployment. It is not uncommon for transgender youth to be harassed to such an extent that they are essentially forced out of school. Many are then unable to acquire a job because of a lack of education. Additionally, regardless of financial situation, transgender individuals face difficulties in maintaining access to housing. A transgender person may be rejected by family members and even kicked out of the family home, losing the primary safety net many people utilize during hard times. Some transgender youth, prohibited from living and dressing as their chosen gender identity, choose to leave home. Transgender people teetering on the brink of poverty may be pushed into homelessness due to discrimination from housing providers and landlords.

Although, as mentioned before, there are few comprehensive studies of transgender individuals, needs-assessments done in urban areas provide some insight into transgender people’s experiences with poverty. The Washington, DC Transgender Needs Assessment Study, conducted in Washington, D.C. from September 1998 to May 2000, found that one third of transgender people were earning $10,000 or less per year, while another third had no source of income (although some of these were full-time students). Only one in four reported being satisfied with their housing situation, and 13% did not feel safe in their current housing.
After financial situation, hostility and insensitivity of housing staff and other residents were cited as the most common barriers in regard to housing. Fifteen percent of respondents reported losing a job due to workplace discrimination and only 58% had paid employment (Xavier, 2000, pp. 14-15, 31-32).

A study of transgender people in San Francisco conducted by the Transgender Law Center and the National Center for Lesbian Rights also showed pervasive discrimination. The study found that 64% of those surveyed made less than $25,000 a year, over 40% did not have health insurance, and one in five did not have stable housing. Almost half had experienced discrimination in employment and a third had experienced discrimination in housing due to their gender identity (Minter & Daley, 2003, pp. 14, 18).

Once in poverty and on the streets, transgender people face additional risks. They become targets for hate crimes because of their identity. Like other homeless and marginalized people, they may become involved in survival street crimes (drug trade, theft, sex work), risking HIV infection or a criminal record. These and other dangers exist alongside the basic injury to human dignity that comes with not having a home—leading to feelings of overwhelming hopelessness, despair, and rejection—in addition to the marginalization these people already face in a trans-phobic society.

The Needs of the Transgender Homeless

Outlined above are some of the many reasons why transgender people have a greater need than gender-conforming people for shelter and other social services. These factors interact with one another and the cumulative effect can be staggering. Tragically, transgender individuals often face discrimination from providers of social services, who could otherwise improve their quality of life. Adequate healthcare is often out of reach, not just for financial reasons, but also due to the discrimination and ignorance of healthcare providers. The transgender poor may be unable to meet “workfare” requirements for government aid due to discrimination at workfare sites. Shelter services often fail to provide safe and respectful environments, leading many transgender people to avoid them and seek other places to stay. There is also the deep emotional injury that comes with not being treated with respect by a service agency that is supposed to be providing assistance.

Given their heightened risk of poverty and homelessness, transgender people desperately need respectful and safe homeless shelter
services. Homeless shelters are designed to be a social safety net for those who need a safe place to stay and assistance getting back on their feet. Right now, in many places, transgender people are left to struggle against significant obstacles without that needed safety net.

THE FIRST AND MOST CRITICAL STEP: A POLICY OF RESPECT FOR TRANSGENDER PEOPLE

The single most important thing a shelter must do to be safe for transgender people is to understand and implement a policy of respect. Respect is the guiding theme of this article; the specific policies outlined are practical recommendations that flow from the policy of respect and will differ from shelter to shelter. Before discussing in detail the more practical elements of this policy of respect (showering arrangements, for example), we devote this section to explaining why the policy should be adopted, examining what it means in practice, and addressing concerns that shelters may have about its implementation.

The policy of respect is quite simple and should be obvious once the reasons behind it are understood: People should be treated according to their self-identified gender. This policy means that people are who they say they are. If someone says she is a woman, she is, and she should be treated as a woman. This policy of respect is nearly identical to language in the National Coalition for the Homeless’ non-discrimination resolution: “Abiding by this non-discrimination resolution means that housing, shelter and services are to be made available to individuals according to the gender that the person self-identifies as.”

The importance of respecting a person’s self-identity cannot be understated. While most people have never questioned their gender identity, some people have spent a great deal of time struggling over it, trying to understand how they feel inside, how they desire to look outside, whether they can change their gender, and how to tell friends and family about their identity. Transitioning from one gender to another is not undertaken lightly and it comes with many risks. Failure to honor a person’s self-identification creates an unwelcoming and unsafe shelter.

Important Elements of the Policy of Respect

Language. There are many ways the policy of respect plays out (or fails) in a shelter situation. One of the most obvious ways to respect or disrespect a person is the language used to speak about and refer to her or him. If a person identifies as a woman, then “she” should be used to
refer to her. If an individual explains that he identifies as a man, the shelter should not question that identification. That person’s identity should be honored. Once the proper pronoun and name usage is determined it is very important that all staff use them. While mistakes are bound to occur, the important thing is that staff makes a real attempt to use the resident’s preferred name and pronouns. When a mistake is made, staff should correct themselves, acknowledging the mistake.

Confidentiality. It is important to establish a shelter confidentiality policy and understand why a resident’s transgender status should be treated as confidential information—to respect the resident’s privacy, as well as minimize the potential for the resident to experience discrimination, harassment, and violence. In fact, a transgender person should not be required to disclose to staff if he or she is transgender, although shelters should make it a goal that transgender people feel comfortable and safe enough that they can choose to disclose their transgender status. Once transgender status is disclosed to staff, some shelters have found it useful to apply the same policy of confidentiality that they do for information about medical conditions: only the staff needing to know the information are told and other residents are never given information about other people’s medical issues. Other shelters ask transgender people how open they are about their situation and how they would like the issue addressed if it arises. If a transgender person indicates that he or she is very open about being transgender, then staff can discuss this information freely with other residents when appropriate. A policy of treating personal information about a resident’s body and its relation to their gender self-identity confidentially is crucial to making people comfortable enough to disclose their transgender status to staff and discuss any concerns they may have.

Harassment. For transgender residents to be safe, staff must make it clear that harassment is not tolerated and refrain from engaging in any form of harassment or discrimination themselves, even from something they may consider “innocent,” like teasing. If harassment is uncovered, staff have a responsibility to intervene and see that it stops immediately.

Harassment may come from many sources and take a variety of forms. It includes using anti-gay language like “fag” or “dyke,” telling inappropriate stories or jokes (for example, a joke where the punch-line is something about a “chick with a dick”), making sexually inappropriate gestures or come-ons, asking inappropriate questions about a person’s body, or even intentionally and continuously using the wrong pronoun or name for a person. While some incidents may seem like only teasing, transgender residents know that verbal harassment always
comes with the very real threat of escalating into physical harassment and assault. Remarkably, sometimes staff harass transgender people as well. Staff members have a responsibility to stop harassment regardless of its source.

**Housing Placement Based on Self-Identified Gender, Not Surgery**

The most important shelter decision regarding a transgender person is which gender they are housed with. Some shelters have rules that a person’s gender should be determined based only on their physical anatomy. Such a rule is both hurtful and disrespectful when understood from the perspective of a transgender person’s lived experience.

There are many reasons why surgery should not be a dividing line for determining who is or is not a man or woman. Some who desire surgery cannot afford it—surgeries are very expensive, often costing over $70,000, and nearly all health insurance plans exclude them from coverage. Those who want surgery may choose not to have it for a variety of other reasons as well. While surgery is important for many transgender persons to feel comfortable, some do not desire genital surgery because they do not view it as something necessary for their happiness. And, many of the surgeries have poor or unpredictable results, or cannot be performed due to a medical condition a person may have.

Most importantly, whether a person has had surgery or any other medical treatment is usually considered a private matter, and surgery for transgender people should be no different. Transgender people should not have to make their medical history or details of their personal anatomy public knowledge in order to receive respectful treatment. From a more pragmatic point of view, one should remember that the clear consequence of a rule that makes surgery the dividing line between who gets gender-appropriate shelter and who does not means that most transgender people will never get gender-appropriate treatment.

For transgender youth, who are more likely to have gender non-conforming identities that are neither fully male nor female, creating a genderqueer living space may make sense. Such a living space may house lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) and questioning youth together or have transgender residents living with other youth who are accepting of their transgender peers. Housing these youth together provides support and a place where they can feel accepted and can begin to better understand themselves. However, shelters should be sure that they are not isolating these youth and unfairly separating them from others.
In many cities, transgender women (male-to-female) are being housed in male facilities because women’s facilities will not accept them. It is imperative that these male facilities do not simply eject transgender women in a misguided effort to follow the policy of respecting a person’s self-identified gender. Until the local women’s shelters are accepting transgender women in a safe way, men’s shelters need to work on making their shelters safe for all people who seek their services. The reverse is also true—until men’s shelters are safe for transgender men (FTM), it is important for women’s shelters to accept them.

**Concerns for the Safety of Other Residents**

Many of the concerns that make shelters hesitant to implement a rule that does not require surgery can be avoided through education and sensitivity to the needs of both transgender and non-transgender residents. These concerns typically involve the actual privacy and safety of other residents, as well as residents’ own perceptions about their safety. Most commonly, some shelters—specifically women’s shelters—are hesitant to house transgender women who have not had genital surgery with other biological females. Shelters fear that a transgender woman who has not had genital surgery may sexually or physically assault another resident, or that such a possibility will trigger fears for residents who have been traumatized by abuse and sexual assault. To someone who has little experience with transgender people or who has never tried to run a shelter without a surgery-based rule, these concerns may seem very rational.

In actuality, transgender women are no more dangerous than other women. It is not fair or correct to assume that just because a person is transgender or has male genitals she is a physical threat to others. Any woman, transgender or not, could assault another person at any time. Shelters in San Francisco and Boston that for many years have welcomed transgender women report that they have not had assaults committed by transgender women that are unlike those committed by other women.

Judith Pomeroy, who for over five years has managed the St. Anthony Foundation’s Marian Residence for Women in San Francisco of the St. Anthony Foundation, explains that their shelter has accepted transgender women since before she became manager, and they have not found assault to be a problem. “We operate on behavior here and don’t assume that one person is more likely to harm others just by looking at them. If anyone hurts another person, we deal with that reality rather than thinking based on a stereotype that someone will hurt another person,” says Pomeroy (personal communication, December 9,
Gunner Scott works with The Network/La Red in Boston, an organization working against abuse in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community. Scott, who has trained many Boston-area domestic violence shelters that accept transgender women, notes:

> When it comes to transgender people, the more serious risk is that violence will be committed against [them] by others. Also, shelters need to learn that it is a myth that woman-only space is always safe. The occurrence of woman-to-woman abuse by both straight and lesbian women is real, and shelters need clear rules against it. By enforcing these rules for all residents, transgender and non-transgender, these spaces can become truly safe.

*(Personal communication, December 4, 2003)*

By focusing on inappropriate behavior and enforcing those rules equally, shelters protect the safety of everyone without discriminating against transgender women.

Some shelters are also concerned that men who are not transgender may dress as women to gain admittance to a women’s shelter in order to assault women. This hypothetical situation has not come to pass at shelters that accept transgender women. In San Francisco, where transgender-inclusive shelters have operated for the last eight years, Human Rights Commission investigator Marcus Arana notes that, “We have not received a single complaint that any man has ever put on a dress to get into a women’s shelter” (personal communication, December 4, 2003). Not only is such a situation extremely unlikely to occur, but if it did, intake staff would most likely be able to immediately detect that the person did not sincerely identify as a woman. One should keep in mind that transgender people are not trying to be deceptive in order to further sinister objectives; being transgender is a difficult path and one, as mentioned before, that is undertaken with serious and honest intent.

Even when shelter staff recognize that transgender women pose no special threat to other women, they may still have to deal with the fears and transphobia of some non-transgender residents. This is sometimes a difficult situation because it can be hard to distinguish between genuine fears that have nothing to do with the transgender person but rather stem from a resident’s own history of abuse and concerns that are based simply on prejudice and fear of difference. Fortunately, both types of fear can often be mitigated with education, discussion, and sensitivity for all involved.
Sometimes such situations can be addressed simply by having a conversation with the concerned resident, explaining that everyone is to be welcomed and respected at the shelter, outlining the policy of respect and why it is important (“Here we treat everyone as the gender they identify as, regardless of their anatomy.”), and emphasizing that the transgender woman is a woman, not a man. Another way to address this issue is to provide trainings for shelter residents. Such trainings have been conducted extensively in Boston and are remarkably successful. By drawing on the many experiences of disrespect that shelter residents experience as homeless people, residents often leave trainings knowing how important it is for them to show respect to transgender people.

In cases where a resident’s fears are triggered by a personal history of abuse or assault, the best solution is to have a discussion with the resident individually about why she feels unsafe and how her fears can be addressed. The difficulty is in balancing sensitivity to what may be very real fears for a resident and the reality that these fears are not the transgender woman’s fault and have no realistic relation to her. In dealing with these situations, staff of the Marion Residence for Women in San Francisco usually have a conversation with the concerned resident that covers the fact that there are no men in the shelter (transgender women are not men) and that the shelter welcomes all types of women who are not safe on the street. The concerned guest is also told that the shelter has strict rules about inappropriate behavior like assault, and she is assured that staff enforce this rule at all times (J. Pomeroy, personal communication, December 9, 2003). Staff should use their expertise to help the resident work through such feelings.

As mentioned above, trainings for residents may be very effective in breaking down transphobia and making all residents, including those that are transgender, more comfortable. Shelters may be able to find local transgender people to run the training or be on a panel about what it is like to be transgender. In many cities, experienced trainers are available for such educational purposes. The main points trainings should cover include: what transgender and other basic terms mean; what it is like to be transgender; and how to treat transgender people with respect. Diego Sanchez, Director of the TransHealth & Education Development Program at JRI Health in Boston, has trained many shelters across Massachusetts. Sanchez notes that non-transgender residents of shelters are often extremely respectful of their transgender brothers and sisters when they are given education about why the policy of respect has been put in place (personal communication, December 10, 2003). By helping the non-transgender residents make the connection between the
disrespect they experience because they are homeless, and how transgender people feel when others treat them disrespectfully, the non-transgender residents are able to understand and help ensure that transgender people are treated respectfully.

**Genderqueer Residents and Those in the Midst of Transition**

While applying the policy of respect to people who live full-time as one socially recognized gender may be straightforward, it can be confusing for shelter staff when a transgender person is living only part-time in their new gender or has a gender identity that is not strictly male or female. Perhaps the person goes by an old name as well as a new name, dresses mostly in clothing appropriate to their old gender, or has an androgynous or genderqueer identity. Regardless of why a person is not completely identifying as male or female, or what their self-identity is, the policy recommendation remains the same—a policy of respect. What this policy means will vary and each person’s case should be treated individually.

There are a variety of reasons a person may choose to live part-time as one gender and part-time as another. A person may feel that living as their new gender in certain situations makes them more vulnerable to discrimination or violence. They may feel comfortable transitioning only when they feel they can “pass” as a member of the new gender. The name and gender designations on pieces of official identification such as driver licenses and birth certificates are usually difficult and costly to change and sometimes cannot be changed without surgery. These logistical and legal barriers to document changes make transitioning very difficult. If a transgender person’s driver license or other identification does not reflect his or her new gender, potential employers, police, and others will learn that he or she is transgender and may subject him or her to discrimination or abuse.

The best solution for situations where a resident’s gender is not consistently male or female is to have a conversation with the person about his or her privacy and safety needs, and ask whether it would be better for him or her to be housed with men or women (or a gender-neutral or transgender option if the shelter provides one). The transgender resident should be offered all of the options available, and the staff-person should be able to explain the relative privacy and safety considerations of each. After discussing these issues with the resident, the staff-person should defer to the resident’s assessment of what will be safest and most comfortable.
The single most important policy for making shelters transgender-friendly is that transgender people must be treated with respect. Their freedom to define themselves and their gender should be honored in every way, from the language that staff use to refer to them to their housing, bathroom, and showering arrangements. It is crucial to the emotional and physical safety of transgender people to have their gender identities respected and to be treated according to their self-identified gender.

PUTTING POLICY INTO PRACTICE

Creating a Welcoming Environment

When a transgender person first walks into a shelter, he or she may have many fears about how he or she will be treated. Will I be admitted here? Where am I going to sleep? Am I going to be disrespected, dehumanized, or humiliated? The level of anxiety people experience in such situations is often immense. To decrease those fears, it is important that residents feel welcome from the moment they walk in the door, and that this feeling of acceptance continues throughout the intake process.

Adjusting procedures to make transgender people feel safe and welcome will also make it easier for those who are transgender, and have concerns, to disclose that fact and speak with staff about how to ensure their privacy and safety.

The lobby. A facility can help transgender people feel welcome by displaying signs with messages like, “Transgender people are welcome here,” or “Transgender people are respected here,” in the lobby, intake areas or other communal areas, or putting up posters about lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender concerns. Another option is to post the National Coalition for the Homeless policy or a broader non-discrimination policy stating that all people—regardless of race, religion, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, age, disability, HIV status, gender identity, or expression—will be respected in the shelter.

Some shelters have one place for men’s intake and another for women’s intake. This requires that residents commit to a gender without knowing exactly how they will be perceived upon entering that line. If possible, it is recommended that the facility set up a “triage” intake where each person is greeted first by someone who can answer questions regarding the shelter’s policies on gender identity. If a shelter
cannot set up such a triage station, it will help to have signs indicating transgender people are welcome as mentioned above. It is also important that stepping into one line or the other does not bind a resident to certain placement arrangements.

**Intake forms.** The intake process usually includes forms, and it is likely that a facility’s current forms are not transgender-friendly. If the intake form offers only two choices—male or female—a transgender individual confronted with the two checkboxes may not know what to do. We recommend replacing “Male” and “Female” check boxes on forms with “Gender: _________” so that people can describe their gender in their own words. We strongly recommend against adding “Other” to the form so that it reads “☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Other,” as doing so may make transgender people feel like they will not be accepted as their self-identified gender.

Near the gender question on the intake form, there should be a sentence that explains that transgender people are welcome or respected in the facility, similar to the language suggested for the lobby sign. This sentence has a dual purpose: to inform transgender people that they should feel comfortable telling staff they are transgender and to inform all incoming residents that the shelter’s policy mandates respect for transgender people. For single-sex shelters, that do not ask a person’s gender on their intake forms, include sentences like “We provide shelter for many different women here. We have women of different races, different religions, women with mental health issues, lesbian women, and transgender women.” This language indicates to incoming residents that transgender people are welcome (The 519 Church Street Community Centre, n.d.).

**The intake conversation.** The next step is the welcome/intake conversation. All intake staff should be prepared to talk with incoming transgender residents about their privacy and safety concerns and the transgender-related policies and options at the shelter. Such conversation, covering the issues that generate problems and anxiety for transgender people, is intended to alleviate concerns as soon as possible. The conversation should be honest and frank, as it will lay the foundation for trust between the resident and the shelter.

Staff may wonder how they will know whether a resident is transgender. The efforts to make transgender people feel welcome that were discussed above, such as signage in the lobby and statements on intake forms, will hopefully put transgender people at ease. In the intake conversation itself, the staff-person should begin by explaining that all types of people are welcome at the facility and that all personal informa-
tion is considered confidential. Stating this information in every intake conversation is a good idea for all residents, and it will also serve to make transgender people feel as comfortable as possible to disclose their status if they wish to do so. Some people, for fear of discrimination and mistreatment, may still not feel comfortable disclosing that they are transgender, and that is fine too—staff should leave it to the resident to broach the topic of his or her personal gender status.

If a person discloses she (or he) is transgender, the intake staff should ask what her gender identity is and what language she would like used to refer to her. The facility’s confidentiality policy should be explained in more detail and the staff should make sure they clearly understand how open the resident is about her identity. The resident’s safety concerns should be addressed, and she should be told who to talk with if she is being harassed or having other problems. Indicating that there will be firm enforcement of rules protecting transgender residents is important to ease the resident’s anxieties. The staff member should also have a discussion with the resident about the specific living arrangements that will make her most safe and comfortable. Staff should explain the options for showering, bathroom use, and sleeping, and allow the resident to choose which arrangements are right for her.

The importance of having these discussions cannot be overstated. Examining options and concerns in advance help make the process smoother and allows questions from either party to be answered. A facility may need to make a few adjustments to be as safe as it can be for a transgender resident, and hopefully the intake conversation will result in workable solutions.

**Practical Issues of Privacy and Safety**

Concerns for the privacy and safety of all residents are often at their highest when it comes to restroom and showering situations. Given that shelter staff do not always closely monitor bathrooms and showers, it is important to ensure that they are not places where transgender people are vulnerable to violence and harassment. For many transgender people, being exposed in the shower or bathroom will immediately inform other residents of their transgender status, taking away their ability to decide for themselves who should know about their bodies and potentially putting them in danger in the future. A more immediate concern is that, while naked, transgender as well as non-transgender residents are particularly vulnerable to attack, especially in men’s shelters. Some transgender people may be self-conscious and uncomfortable being
seen naked (just as many non-transgender people are) or may be concerned about the possibility of making others feel uncomfortable. Conversely, some non-transgender residents may object to sharing spaces in which nudity is unavoidable with transgender residents who still retain the genitals of the other gender.

In sum, being forced to appear unclothed in front of other people is uncomfortable, dehumanizing, and potentially dangerous for many people for a variety of reasons. Increasing privacy in bathrooms and showers will benefit all people who would prefer not to have the intimate details of their bodies exposed to other residents, including transgender people and individuals who may be embarrassed about medical conditions. Fortunately, there are some simple solutions that can increase privacy and safety in bathrooms and showers, for the benefit of all residents.

Restrooms. Which restroom a transgender resident will use is a question that sometimes confuses well-meaning shelter administrators. The solution comes from applying the guiding principle of respect: transgender people should be welcome to use bathrooms that correspond to their self-identified gender. Some alterations in bathroom setup may be necessary to increase privacy and safety for everyone.

If possible, provide at least one single-stall restroom with a door that locks, marked simply as “restroom.” This solution eliminates the awkwardness that some transgender people face when trying to decide which restroom they should use. Staff should place signs near the gender-specific bathrooms noting that a single-stall restroom is available elsewhere. In multi-stall restrooms, make sure that the individual stalls have doors (or curtains, at the least), that the doors can be locked, and that stall walls provide full coverage and privacy. If providing doors on all of the stalls is not feasible, at least one of the stalls should be given a door. If only multiple-stall bathrooms exist and doors are not available, consider installing a lock (possibly with a key) on the entry door to the restroom area. This would allow transgender residents and other residents with special concerns to use the restroom privately, locking the door from the inside while they use the facilities. However, it is important that all staff be able to open the restroom door from the outside in case someone has a medical emergency inside or the staff need to enter for safety reasons.

Showers. How a particular facility is able to accommodate transgender people’s privacy needs while showering will, of course, be dictated by practical considerations such as space and budget. Successfully
implemented solutions, some of which can be accomplished with little space or expense, are outlined below.

The preferred option is, of course, to create total privacy, by providing individual bathing and dressing areas. If walls are cost-prohibitive, creative use of curtains (inexpensive and easy to install) can create private showering spaces. Where total privacy is not possible, a shelter should try to provide a special shower or ensure that at least one shower stall has complete privacy and a lock. It is strongly recommended that transgender people not be required to shower in the private shower, as doing so might indicate to others that they are transgender, which can increase their risk for harassment and assault. This rule may of course be tempered, depending on the situation, if there are valid concerns for the comfort of other residents.

One last resort option is to allow a resident to shower alone in the group shower. The shelter could have the resident shower at a convenient time when others are not using the facility, possibly locking the door to the shower facility as well. This solution, however, has the same problem as requiring the transgender person to use a special shower— it isolates him or her and might draw attention to the individual, indicating to others that he or she is transgender. Also, regardless of the shower setup, the facility may want to provide a monitor outside the showering area to control who enters and exits while a transgender person, or any resident who has special safety concerns, is showering. Providing a safe, secure, and comfortable showering environment should be a shelter priority for all residents.

Sleeping arrangements. Under the policy of respect, sleeping placement should be based on a transgender person’s self-identified gender, not the individual’s anatomy. It is crucial that staff talk about privacy and safety needs with those who have only partly transitioned, are moving between a female and male identity, or are gender non-conforming in any way, and ask where they will feel most comfortable.

Even when a transgender person is placed where he or she feels most comfortable, he or she may still have greater safety concerns than other residents. Because the lights are dimmed and fewer staff are on duty, transgender people are at an increased risk of assault at night. For example, transgender women (male-to-female) who are required to sleep in the same room with men often report that the male residents harass, sexually proposition, and sometimes assault them. Without steps to resolve this type of situation, transgender people may return to the streets, believing they can be safer there than in the shelter.
There are a few small policy adjustments that can be made to ensure basic physical safety for transgender residents at night. Again, there are many ways to handle this issue, and policies should be tailored to each individual shelter. It is important to remember, however, that transgender residents may not want to draw attention to or isolate themselves and rearranging bed assignments when they arrive may do just that. Defer to their sense of what is safe, and never require them to sleep separately from others.

All shelters are arranged differently, but often there are some beds in group sleeping areas that are closer to night staff and are thus safer places for transgender residents to sleep. Other shelters have rooms set aside for people who need to sleep separately from others for various reasons or have some rooms that house only two people. A transgender resident may feel most safe being placed in one of these separate rooms, either alone or with a transgender-friendly roommate. Occasionally, there are enough openly transgender residents or other residents with increased safety concerns (for example, lesbian and gay people) that a shelter can designate one area for these individuals to room together. However, this solution is controversial and not always effective, as it treats residents of the segregated wing differently than others and may draw attention to them, increasing their safety risk. Additionally, a segregated wing does nothing for those who want their transgender status to remain unknown to other residents.

**Dress Codes**

Although relatively uncommon, some shelters have gender-based dress codes. Such dress codes restrict the freedom of all people—transgender or not—to express their self-defined gender. If a shelter deems a dress code to be important, it is strongly recommended that it not be based on gender and be fairly and equally applied to everyone. For example, a policy could simply require that everyone cover certain areas of the body.

There are serious consequences of enforcing a gender-based dress code. One particular male facility on the East Coast accepts transgender women (MTF) only if they are not wearing long nails, hair extensions, makeup, or female clothing. These women, who are denied shelter altogether at the women’s facilities in town, must choose between being safe during the day—which for them requires their nails and hair extensions so they “pass” completely as women—and being able to go to the shelter at night. For other transgender women, being safe during the day
may mean dressing as men, although they continue to live as women at night. A transgender woman who must put on male clothing at certain times for safety should not be turned away. Also, a transgender person should not be required to put on certain clothing before entering a shelter because the shelter may be the first place they can put on that clothing safely.

Youth shelters are the most common places dress codes are found, for they are often more than a place to sleep and instead act in loco parentis (a legal phrase meaning that staff assume the responsibilities of a parent). When transgender youth express their gender identities, they often violate gender-based dress codes and face discipline. It can be emotionally damaging for a young person to have her burgeoning self-identity crushed and to be told that her identity is somehow “wrong.” In addition, forcing youth to adhere to dress codes may be illegal. One foster care facility run by the New York City Administration for Children’s Services disciplined a transgender girl (born male) for dressing as a girl. She sued, and the court held that, under New York law, she had to be allowed to dress in accordance with her gender identity while in the foster care facility (Doe v. Bell, 2003).

Resource Referral

No single agency is ever equipped to handle every need of a homeless individual. Referrals are thus a vital part of providing comprehensive services to help residents get back on their feet and into permanent housing. As non-discrimination laws have been enacted, and as the transgender community works to overcome ignorance and fear, more and more service agencies are learning about transgender issues and are establishing policies of respect. But until all discrimination stops, shelters need to be aware of and sensitive to discrimination that residents may experience while trying to acquire outside services. Here are some guidelines for referring people to other agencies and resources:

- **Never tell a referral agency that a resident is transgender, unless the transgender resident asks staff to do so.** A resident’s status is confidential, and disclosing it might result in discrimination at the referral agency. The transgender resident, however, may want staff to tell the referral agency to make the process smoother and to make everyone involved more comfortable. For example, a
transgender man (female-to-male) may still need gynecological services, but if he enters a women’s health services agency with no prior warning and tells the nurse he is there for an appointment, problems may arise. The important thing is to discuss with transgender residents whether or not they would like staff to disclose their situation to a given service provider.

- **Educate referral agencies on the shelter’s policies.** Encourage agencies to which the shelter frequently refers residents to change their policies to be more transgender-inclusive. Put staff’s knowledge of how to welcome transgender individuals to use by sharing it with others. If it is against local or state law to discriminate against transgender people, use this as motivation.

- **Have transgender-specific referrals available if they exist in the area.** In many places, there are transgender organizations or service agencies that have professionals who specialize in working with transgender people. Find out who those people are and use them as resources. If they are not able to take a referral, they may be able to point staff in the direction of someone else who is transgender-friendly.

- **Be aware of agencies that do not accept transgender individuals.** Sadly, there are still many agencies that simply deny services to transgender people. Sending a transgender resident to such a service agency will break all trust that staff may have created with the resident, and could begin the victimization and trauma all over again. Being in a position of power as the provider, it is vital that staff do their best not to refer transgender people to discriminatory agencies. Instead, educate those agencies about the need to change their policies before referring residents to them.

- **Know local and state laws or know how to find out what they are.** Transitioning is often a long process that requires jumping through many hoops. Know the procedures for changing name and gender on legal documents (i.e., driver’s license, Social Security records) or know where to refer transgender clients to get that information. Procedures for changing all of these documents are different and often vary from state to state. Knowing where to find the answers can help transgender residents get their lives in order without experiencing discrimination in the process.

- **Give referrals to legal organizations that can help enforce the legal rights of a resident if he or she experiences discrimination.**
CONCLUSION:
MAKING THE TRANSITION TO A SAFE SHELTER

Each shelter’s journey to becoming the safest shelter possible for all people will be different. However, there are a few things that a shelter can do to make the process smoother. The shelter should consider getting in contact with local transgender activists who can assist with the process, help develop policy, build referral lists, and train staff and residents. Clear written policies covering issues such as respect, confidentiality, housing placement, showering and bathroom arrangements, and harassment should be developed and all staff should know and understand them. It is very important that staff is trained on the policy of respect for transgender people and its practical implications. The shelter may want to make this article or other information available for all staff to familiarize themselves with transgender issues. Each shelter should do an evaluation of the privacy and safety of its restrooms and showering areas and make any necessary adjustments. Other small things need to be done, such as building a referral list of transgender support organizations and social service agencies that welcome transgender people. Also, signs indicating that the shelter respects transgender people may need to be placed in the lobby and other high traffic areas, and intake processes and forms may need to be adjusted. The process may take time, but each step in the direction of respect will make transgender residents safer and happier.

NOTES
3. See, Trans Communities Shelter Access Project of the 519 Church Street Community Centre. The Project has many resources related to transgender health, homelessness, and community building and contains recommendations for homeless shelters specifically. Available at http://www.the519.org
4. For additional information about this topic, see, Gender Education & Advocacy, Inc. (2001). “Basic tips for health care and social service providers for working with
transgendered people.” Available at http://www.gender.org/resources/dge/gea01006.pdf


6. Transsexual people may or may not be diagnosed with gender dysphoria or gender identity disorder, diagnoses listed in the DSM-IV. The authors and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force support the reform of these diagnoses, possibly through the creation of a medical diagnosis that does not pathologize transgender people or gender non-conforming children.


REFERENCES


Respect: At this shelter, we have a policy of respect for all people, including transgender people. Our policy is to respect the gender of each person as they self-identify it, without regard to whether they have had surgery or other medical treatments. For example, if someone says she is a woman, she is a woman.

Housing, Bathrooms, and Showers: Residents are to be housed with and use the showers and bathrooms for the gender with which they self-identify. People who do not clearly identify as male or female are to be housed in and use the bathrooms and showers in whichever section they feel safest and most comfortable. If this bothers other residents, staff should patiently explain to those residents that the transgender person is not a threat to them and should be respected. Residents who are worried about privacy should be reminded that all showers and bathrooms in the facility allow for bodily privacy and that single-use showers and bathrooms are available if they prefer.

Private Bathrooms and Showers: All residents should be told about the single-use showers and bathrooms in the facility and all should be welcome to use them.

Sleeping Arrangements: Transgender residents—and others with increased safety needs—should be offered bed space closest to the night staff so that if there is a problem, they may contact staff quickly for help.

Harassment: Harassment of all kinds is prohibited. Staff must enforce this rule consistently.

Intake: All incoming residents are to be told the following: (1) This shelter respects transgender residents. (2) Private information such as medical information and information about whether or not a person is transgender, etc., is kept confidential unless the resident wishes otherwise. (3) No harassment of other residents is allowed.

If a resident reveals to staff that he or she is transgender, the intake conversation should include the following additional topics: housing placement and sleeping arrangements, including the availability of beds close to night staff if the resident prefers; shower and bathroom placement, including the availability of private showers and bathrooms that the resident may use if he or she prefers; and the name and pronouns (“he” or “she”) the resident would like staff to use.

APPENDIX: A MODEL POLICY FOR SAFE SHELTERS