



Outreach Advocacy

Providing Safe Space When There is No Local Shelter

While there are only 53 (2020) shelters on tribal lands throughout the United States, many tribal communities offer victim/survivor services through outreach advocacy programs.

Typically, these advocacy programs offer safe space by providing:

- 1) transport to out-of-the-area shelter
- 2) use of motel rooms in the area
- 3) safe homes
- 4) providing assistance to the survivor and her friends or relatives while she stays in their home
- 5) Other?

Out-of-Area Shelter

Out-of-area-shelters are often staffed by non-Native advocates and may or may not be culturally competent. Some of these shelters have a time limited length of stay and may even release a survivor and their children from shelter when a determination is made that the batterer is not in the local community. Survivors have reported being referred to the local homeless shelter for services when this happens.

In other instances, a survivor may experience the out-of-area shelter as nurturing and supportive and get what she needs to either come home with greater strength and resolve to live without violence or she/he may choose to permanently leave her/his community.

Advocates should share any information they have about the rules and expectations of the shelter the survivor is being referred to. It is usually helpful for advocates to provide pro-active support by communicating to the non-Native shelter(s) best ways to provide culturally competent services to Native survivors and their children.

No matter what the experience, it is important for advocates to let survivors know it is okay and appropriate for them to stay in contact with your advocacy program while they are residing at the non-Native shelter.

What has been your experience with out-of-area shelter?

Motel Rooms

Many advocacy programs use motels as a short-term response for providing safe space, especially when the tribal does not have its own domestic violence shelter. Since the program will be paying for the stay, the owner or manager will be aware that the survivor is not safe at home. In using a motel, the following points should be considered:

- 1) The information provided to the motel owner/manager should be minimal and shared with motel staff on a need-to-know basis. The survivor should have knowledge of and give permission for any information shared.
- 2) The survivor should be made aware of any program or motel conditions for the stay. For example, visitors, partying/drinking, arrangements about food, etc. (see Note below)

- 3) The survivor, advocacy program, and motel should have a common understanding about law enforcement involvement. In many instances, law enforcement is a helping force and can provide regular patrols. Caution and communication with law enforcement is essential to avoid service of any warrants the survivor might have. The danger threat should also be determined, and law enforcement intervention planned accordingly.
- 4) The advocacy program should be prepared for a more intense level of involvement by the shelter program staff especially when:
 - a. food or baby/children's items are needed daily.
 - b. the survivor is feeling isolated and alone/lonely
 - c. developing a safety plan and advocating for institutional safety supports as quickly as possible.

Continue supporting survivors in making decisions about what they need to do in order to obtain longer term safety.

What has been your experience using motels as safe space?

Notes:

- Visiting with survivors about the use of substances, including alcohol, as a common but unsafe way to cope with their trauma, and the supports that the advocacy program can provide (crisis counseling, support groups, assistance in entering treatment, etc.) is recommended as a routine part of orientation to the program. Many programs have a "No use on program property" rule or guideline, that will apply to motel/hotel stays the advocacy program is paying for. Motel/hotel staff are usually not expected to monitor the behavior of survivors staying at their facility any more than they would another guest. The survivor, advocacy program and motel/hotel should have a common understanding of what will happen if problematic issues around substance use or other instances arise. Written policy can be helpful if it allows for responses appropriate for individual situations.
- It is important for advocates to encourage women to be open and honest about the existence of any warrants so advocates can help navigate and negotiate police response, but the program cannot mandate this disclosure. Often law enforcement will be willing to forgo service of warrants and advise the woman to take care of it when her situation has stabilized. If the danger threat is imminent, continue to encourage out-of-area shelter.

Safe Homes

An advocacy program may develop a more formal system of providing short-term safe space with identified families who are willing to open their homes and provide refuge for survivors and their children who are in immediate danger. Safe homes are a temporary refuge until other safety arrangements can be made. The following might be considered when developing safe homes:

- 1) Provide an orientation for the family, including older youth in the home, that includes the impact of battering on survivors and their children, confidentiality, and services the safe home family can expect from the advocacy program such as food, supplies, or financial compensation.
- 2) Provide written information that gives crisis numbers such as law enforcement, the advocacy program, and individuals to contact.
- 3) Provide "need to know" information about the survivor's situation. It is up to the survivor whether or not she/he will share any details.
- 4) Determine level of threat and window of safety. Make sure the survivor is quickly moved to other safe space if the threat is great. Determine whether or not law enforcement will be made aware that the survivor is staying at the safe home, based on individual survivor's situation and comfort/safety needs/desire.

- 5) Determine any relationship between the safe home residents and the survivor and children before approaching the safe home family about housing the survivor.
- 6) Expect to have a high level of intense involvement during a safe home stay since all parties need support.

What has been your experience with safe homes?

Note: Safe homes might be utilized during adverse weather, lack of DV shelter facilities/bed space, or other circumstances that prohibit use of other immediate safety options. The safety of the safe home family is also a priority. Sometimes the knowledge that a safe home is formally attached to the advocacy program creates sufficient boundaries to deter the batterer from further violence.

Staying with Relative and Friends

Many survivors will identify and approach relatives and friends who they can stay with for a few days until other safe space arrangements are made. Advocates can assist survivors in thinking about this option. The following support should be considered when working with a survivor who is considering or has informed you that she/he is staying with relatives or friends as a short-term safety option:

- 1) Does the location of the relative or friend's home minimize threat and maximize safety?
- 2) Does the family have the resources to support the survivor and any children even if only for a few days?
- 3) What resources can the advocacy program provide?
- 4) Is the survivor and relatives or friends aware of what to do in the event the batterer becomes aware of where she is?
- 5) Can the relatives or friends get the survivor and any children to another location or keep them safe until assistance arrives?
- 6) What level of involvement does the survivor expect from the advocacy program?

What has been your experience when a survivor and any children stay with relatives or friends as a safety option?

Note: This safety option can create greater stress for the survivor especially when relatives or friends don't have the resources to help. And, the batterer may feel more entitled to act with violence since there are few to no institutional boundaries in place. The survivor is likely to know the level of danger there is to relatives or friends and other safety options should be explored immediately.

When Is Development of Shelter Needed in the Community?

It might be time to consider planning and developing an actual shelter in the community when out-of-area shelter transports or advocacy support begin to stress or exceed the capacity of the advocacy program.

There are tribal coalitions, national organizations, and individuals with the expertise to assist in the planning and development of shelter.

Has your advocacy program considered opening shelter? What concerns do you or your community have about developing shelter?

Note: Many small rural tribal communities believe that a survivor and any children cannot be kept safe for any period of time in the community. The facilitator may want to share stories about the challenges and benefits of having an actual shelter in the community.

Written by Karen Artichoker for NIWRC 2020