

Addendum to the Testimony of Roberta Valente, Public Policy Consultant
National Coalition Against Domestic Violence

Testimony before the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland
Security on the "Reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act"

The domestic violence field is committed to upholding the safety and dignity of all survivors, regardless of their demographic characteristics. This includes transgender survivors, who experience a staggeringly high rate of intimate partner violence and sexual assault. A 2015 survey found that more than half (54%) of the over 27,000 respondents had experienced intimate partner violence, and almost half (47%) experienced sexual assault.¹ Between 2013 and 2018, almost two dozen trans people were murdered by intimate partners.² We serve survivors and respect survivors and turn no one away, and we respect people for who they are, including for their gender identities.

Suggestions that trans victims seeking shelter pose a danger to other survivors are both hurtful to trans survivors who are already among the most marginalized persons in American society and betray a lack of understanding about the operating principles of programs and advocates whose primary concern is the safety and security of all victims. The most important principle underlying the work of domestic violence shelters is safety. Shelters are a refuge for victims of physical, emotional, financial, sexual and technological abuse. The very purpose and design of shelters is to make the victim of abuse (and the victim's dependents) feel secure.

One way to think about the goal and purpose of shelter programs is to think about how an emergency room operates. The most important intake protocol is assessing the nature of the crisis and providing assistance in a timely manner. When the shelter client is safely situated, the shelter staff delve into demographic matters that may impact placement in the shelter and the types of longer term services that a shelter client will need.

When someone enters a shelter, s/he/they will go through a series of carefully designed screening protocols. As the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence notes in their guidelines for screening and intake:

Screening . . . questions should be limited and focused on: the survivor's priorities; understanding what the survivor identifies as risks to themselves or their children; and the threats posed by the abuser that impact safety for the caller or their children. Shelter Screenings should lead with the intention to provide safety and advocacy services for individuals experiencing a range of abusive tactics from their partner. Shelter screenings should determine eligibility based on the survivor's perception and understanding of the

risks they are facing from their abuser. Determination of shelter eligibility should go beyond the limited legal definitions of domestic violence found in statute . . . Programs provide ongoing training for staff, volunteers and relief workers about the shelter screening and intake to build consistency and a shared understanding about the purpose of these processes.³

The Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence recommends the following welcoming statement for someone showing up at a shelter in seek of refuge:

I hope we will be able to provide you with the resources you need and if not, guide you in the right direction. Our program welcomes everyone – and we open our doors to individuals who reach out to us from different cultures, race and ethnicities, from a variety of religious backgrounds, folks with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations, folks with hidden or visible disabilities, folks who have substance use challenges, folks with money or no money – just like the world around us.⁴

Once a shelter has established trust and safety, a victim advocate may proceed to asking a survivor about more personal details, including gender identity. The purpose for asking about gender identity is to be able to address and interact with the survivor in a way that makes the survivor feel respected and understood.

The ensuing intake process can take an hour or more, as the victim advocate listens to the survivor's story and begins to understand the survivor's concerns and help the survivor identify safety, residential, counseling and other programmatic options that are available. The victim advocate will also engage in immediate safety planning with the survivor in order to determine exactly what the survivor (and her dependents) will need to be safe from further abuse. Those options may include entering the shelter, being transported to another safe location, or returning home after rigorous safety planning.

This extensive screening process also enables victim service providers to identify persons seeking shelter who may, for whatever reason, pose a danger to other shelter residents. Advocates' number one priority is the safety and welfare of the survivors they serve. If a person seeking shelter is deemed to be a safety risk to the other residents, programs will provide the person with alternative accommodations to both safeguard that person's safety and that of shelter residents.

As the survivor settles into the shelter program, staff will meet regularly (often daily) to assess the survivor's progress and healing. If shelter placement is inappropriate for any particular survivor, the program will make every effort to provide alternative, but equally safe accommodations such as temporary placement in a hotel. For example, survivors may have

religious needs (ex. Kosher food), may need services in a language other than English, or may need services that are responsive to their cultural norms and values. For trans survivors, this may include longer term placement with a program specializing in LGBTQ services.

Every survivor is unique, but every survivor also has common needs. VAWA-funded programs help to fulfill these universal needs: the need for safety, the need for support, and the need for respect. VAWA is for all survivors.

Further reading:

Anti-Violence Programs. Southern Arizona AIDS Foundation. <https://saaf.org/care-services/anti-violence-programs/>

Creating a Trans-Welcoming Environment: A tips sheet for sexual assault service providers. Forge. http://www.ncdsv.org/images/FORGE_CreatingATrans-welcomingEnvironment.pdf

Best Practices Manual for Domestic Violence Programs. Arizona Coalition Against Domestic Violence. http://www.ncdsv.org/images/Best%20Practices%20Manual%20for%20DV%20Prgrms_AZCA DV.pdf

Equal Access for Transgender People: Supporting Inclusive Housing and Shelters. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. <http://www.transequality.org/sites/default/files/docs/resources/Equal-Access-for-Transgender-People-Supporting-Inclusive-Housing-and-Shelters.pdf>

A National Epidemic: Fatal Anti-Trans Violence in America in 2018. Human Rights Campaign. <https://assets2.hrc.org/files/assets/resources/AntiTransViolence-2018Report-Final.pdf>.

Screening and Intake Forms For Non-Emergency Domestic Violence Programs. Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence. <https://wscadv.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Non-Emergency-Services-Screening-Intake-Forms-and-Guidelines-for-Advocates-1.pdf>

Signs to Look For in an Abusive Personality. Safeplace Olympia. <https://www.safeplaceolympia.org/signs-to-look-for-in-an-abusive-personality/>

¹ Human Rights Campaign (2018). *A national epidemic: Fatal anti-trans violence in America in 2018*. Retrieved from <https://assets2.hrc.org/files/assets/resources/AntiTransViolence-2018Report-Final.pdf>.

² Ibid.

³ Boyland, Deadria (2016). *Screening and intake forms for non-emergency domestic violence programs*. Retrieved from <https://wscadv.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Non-Emergency-Services-Screening-Intake-Forms-and-Guidelines-for-Advocates-1.pdf>.

⁴ Ibid.