



Shelter Rules: Who Needs Them?

By Linda A. Osmundson

A shelter worker is beaten and raped by an abuser whose wife is in the shelter, reports the New York Times. The worker is employed in a battered women's shelter with a public address, the article continues. Then follows a discussion of the debate over whether shelter location should have been confidential.

The implication is that if their shelter rules had required a confidential location, the rape would have been prevented. Maybe. Maybe not. I happen to think that abusers, intent on horrible violence, will find a confidential shelter nearly as easily as a public shelter with only a little additional persistence. We can only speculate.

The majority of shelters still maintain a confidential location. They have elaborate rules and procedures to preserve their secret. The workers and the women residents believe secrecy rules improve safety for battered women and their children. More recently, a few shelter providers have boldly published their address, believing that a very public address improves security.

Are either of these methods of operating wrong? Not necessarily. Local realities, local herstory, funding, physical location, state laws, county and city ordinances, philosophy, mission and a host of additional factors govern this decision.

Most important, all rules should ensure safety. All rules need to be respectful of the women and children they are supposed to protect. Rules should make it possible for women and children to live comfortably and safely in shelters. If a rule exists only for the convenience of the staff, it needs to be reexamined.

If a rule exists solely to reinforce the power and control of the staff, it should be reexamined. It is a painful struggle to evaluate our own power and control issues, implicit in our efforts to support women in making their own best choices. But this is the hard work of the battered women's movement. Our work is life-changing and the first lives the work changes are our own. Detecting the control factors in our own shelter, advocacy and service systems may mean challenging cherished beliefs and practices.

Everyone appreciates a clean, orderly home. But do we put frightened women and children out of our shelters for failure to meet our standards of cleanliness? Have we become the neatness police? Or a mock paramilitary organization bouncing a quarter off a tightly made bed? Often the inability to maintain order is the objectification of the terror and chaos a batterer has inflicted on a woman or child. Preserving order may also have a lot to do with the physical design of our shelter and how many closets and drawers each family is allocated in crowded shelters. The design of the shelter may make it impossible to be tidy. As long as we do not endanger the health, a perfectly tidy shelter may not be an important goal. We have reduced the staff embarrassment problem by telling our funders and occasional visitors that they can only tour the communal living space but not the bedrooms with closed doors.

Rules for control of medications are critical. For many years our staff locked up all medications in our file cabinets, requiring the women to request and sign for their own medications. We rationalized that we were protecting residents from themselves. But, when we boiled the issue down, our real responsibility was to protect small children from accidentally getting into someone's medications. We installed lockers for each adult woman and we issue locks when women enter the shelter. It is now the responsibility of the residents to lock their own medications in their individual lockers to protect the children. We have closed our "pharmacy" and have stopped "protecting" (controlling) the women. We simply remind the women to keep medications and other valuables in their locker. An added benefit of lockers was near elimination of problems or accusations of theft because the residents are able to lock away money, food stamps and important papers.

A few years ago in our shelter the telephone is a point of control. All calls to the women were answered (and screened) by staff. This was another rationalization that we were protecting women from themselves. We thought we needed to know who was calling. We thought we could keep women from talking to the abuser. Staff had difficulty giving up control when we decided to install a house phone with its own (unlisted) phone number. Women may give the phone number to their family or prospective employer or whomever they choose. Since women answered like a personal phone, residents did not need to disclose that they were residing in the shelter. A bonus for staff was reducing the time it took to answer calls and locate residents. The residents do that for themselves.

One shelter only allows food to be served for one hour in the morning, one hour at noon and one hour in the evening. Women with different work schedules and children with different school schedules simply go hungry or find food outside of the shelter or hide food in their rooms.

Some shelters have a rule that women must have called the police or applied for an injunction before they can be admitted to the shelter. This type of rule may disproportionately exclude women who have had bad experiences with law enforcement or the justice system such as lesbians, women of color and poor women.

There are shelters who use a merit and demerit system or some other sort of behavior modification technique. These systems seem to me to treat battered women like school children or military forces, instead of empowered adult women. Some years ago our state debated this practice at a meeting. Interestingly, nearly all women who identified as formerly battered women adamantly opposed a merit/demerit system.

Does your shelter have a mandatory attendance requirement at support groups, classes and other programs designed to help shelter residents? I know we think women need these opportunities, but what are the consequences for failure to attend? Should we actually put women and children out of our shelters for this disobedience to our rules? We struggle with the mandatory attendance requirements at our program. We all agree that we do not want any woman put out of the shelter for failure to attend. But we really, really think our groups are helpful. We realize that instead of rules, we actually mean guidelines. There are only a couple rules that when-violated would force someone out of our shelter. Right now we have compromised on asking new residents to attend one support group and try it out. If she hates them she doesn't need to attend again.

Is there a curfew at your shelter? Why? We have a curfew because our shelter is dormitory style with more than one family in a room. It was very disruptive for children to be awakened when another mother and children noisily arrived very late. The public transportation stops fairly early in our city and we do not ordinarily have the staff to pick up women who miss a late bus. Of course, we still pick up stranded women and children who miss the bus but it is less frequent now. However, I have visited a shelter which has a Realtor's' combination lock-box on the front door. Residents may come in at any time. To preserve security, the combination is changed frequently.

What are your shelter's rules about confidentiality? It took us several years to decide that we would no longer pretend. We still do not advertise, photograph or publish our location. We have been in the same downtown urban neighborhood for about ten years and have probably sheltered at least 6000 women and children. The shelter has survived several major renovation projects using public money, so at least 50 construction workers know our location. Every taxi driver, several plumbers, refrigerator, copy machine, computer and other repair people know our location. Quite a few pizza delivery people know our address. Any

number of funders and program monitors have been to the shelter. At least 1000 volunteers know the location of the shelter. We realized we were kidding only ourselves that the shelter location was a secret.

Worse, pretending the location was confidential was a tremendous hardship for the residents. How could she tell her 4 year old to lie about where she had lived for a month? She was supposed to walk at least 6 blocks to meet a ride from a friend or family when it was not necessarily safe for her to walk six blocks alone or with children or carrying groceries. It was impossible for differently abled women. Most residents had their friends and family drop them off around the corner so we would not see them. How could we justify making her lie about how far she walked? Were we penalizing the honest women and forcing others to lie to us and to others? I think so.

While there are no correct answers that will fit for every shelter and every situation I hope we will continue to ask ourselves, "How can we be most respectful to the shelter residents?" Are our rules simply for the convenience of the staff? Do we have rules that were made to address a problem that happened 6 years ago? Does everyone need that rule or was it just a situation that should have been addressed individually?

Sometimes, in our efforts to provide safety for battered women and their children, we try to control their entire environment. If we believe women have the right to be powerful, independent decision-makers, then we shelter staff must continue to reevaluate our needs for control. We must keep asking ourselves, "Is this rule respectful?" "Does this rule increase safety?" If we cannot answer yes, then perhaps we do not need the rule.

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