

Changing Punitive Shelter Rules to Simple Community Expectations

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On February 15, the Alliance kicks off the 2018 **Emergency Shelter Learning Series** with a brand new **webinar** to answer your most challenging and frequently asked questions. Throughout 2017, we were thrilled to see how many organizations across the country were making the shift to lower-barrier, housing-focused shelter models.

Emergency shelters are a critical part of an effective crisis response system that ends homelessness. Through resources like the Emergency Shelter Learning Series and the **Five Keys to Effective Shelter**, the Alliance supports providers, funders, and system leaders to strengthen emergency shelter practices. We are enthusiastic to learn from the experts doing this work every day and encourage you to continue to tell us about strategies that are working and the questions you have. (In fact, you can let us know what parts of the Learning Series were helpful and what changes you are making in your community via this survey.)

Recent webinars in the series featured shelter providers who shared strategies for retooling shelter policies while still maintaining health and safety. One important aspect of this effort is to turn overly complicated or restrictive rules into simple and respectful community expectations. **Rather than getting bogged down in compliance and monitoring, this allows staff and participants to build on people's strengths and focus on the most important need: getting participants housed as quickly as possible.**

Many of you told us that you were re-writing the rules with success. So what does this transition look like in practice?

One provider shared their revised client handbook. They got their old 26-page rulebook down to eight pages of health and safety expectations! Below are a few "before and after" snapshots.

BEFORE	AFTER
<p>NO outside food is allowed onto the property. (Except for babies) Food is only allowed in the dining room and must not leave the area.</p>	<p>Health and Safety: Food and beverages are only allowed in the dining room. Water and baby bottles are permitted in your room.</p>
<p>Every family is required to be here at 6pm to eat dinner. Working evenings or midnights are the only exception to this requirement. Appointments that result in you or a family member missing dinner need approval from the Shelter Director ahead of time.</p>	<p>Dinner is served between 6:30pm and 7:30pm. If you have appointments that have been approved by staff, dinner can be saved for you. After 7:30pm, the dinner meal will no longer be available. An alternative meal will be available after 7:30pm for families that return after dinner and did not have approved appointments.</p>
<p>All doors are locked at 8pm. We cannot approve late nights while you are in shelter unless it is related to work, housing or a school activity. Must be approved at least 48 hours in advance.</p>	<p>Please let staff know if you are using the patio after 11:00pm. This is for the safety and security of the shelter.</p>
<p>Shelter Director will schedule room inspections to make sure your room is in good condition. Staff reserve the right to perform unannounced inspections when necessary.</p>	<p>We respect the privacy of your room and will not come in without your knowledge unless there is an emergency.</p>
<p>Your family's clothes must be appropriate for a family environment. Shoes or slippers must be worn at all times.</p>	<p>Shoes or slippers must be worn at all times to protect from injury.</p>
<p>You must, when asked, meet with the Shelter Director to go over shelter issues.</p>	<p>All adults are expected to attend Community Meetings.</p>

In addition to these changes, the staff eliminated any signage, instructions, and advice that assumed deficits or predicted failure with shelter participants. Below are examples of situations that may be addressed with individual shelter residents as needed, but are unlikely to be necessary to include in a handbook distributed to every resident:

- “If progress toward your goals is not being made, an extension may not be granted.”
- “Breakfast is the most important meal of the day so make sure to be present at 9 am meal time.”
- “The best prevention against getting sick is washing your hands so make sure you wash your and your children’s hands!”

Instead, they are focusing on the strengths of each person and building on those to support their search for housing.

Have you made changes to your shelter rules and client handbooks as a result of this Learning Series? Are you implementing the Five Keys? Do you have ideas for future webinars and resources? [Share them with us via this survey.](#)

Thanks for your participation and for all of your continued efforts to be the frontline response to ending homelessness in your communities!