



NNEDV

Safety & Privacy Considerations When Using Hotels for Emergency Shelter Stays

Some domestic violence shelters may use hotels or motels for overflow when their emergency shelters are full or when a hotel better meet the needs of the survivor (accessibility, safety). Programs will often have to take extra precautions around safety, privacy and confidentiality. When survivors stay at a hotel or motel, the shelter staff cannot control who enters or leaves the hotel or the possibility that others may reveal the survivor's location. This handout provides some suggestions and best practices on how programs can maximize survivor safety and confidentiality when working with a hotel or motel as an emergency shelter option.

Working with the Hotel

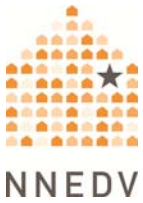
Work with a hotel that you trust. Before you use a hotel to house survivors, talk to the hotel manager about what you want to use the hotel for and why privacy and confidentiality is vital. Depending on your comfort and your relationship with the hotel, you may or may not reveal that the guests are victims of domestic violence. If hotel management/staff doesn't seem sympathetic, move on to another hotel. During this stage, you might be able to negotiate a flat rate and other amenities. For most hotels, their goal is to fill rooms, and if you can promise steady guests for them, they might be willing to negotiate a cheaper rate. If possible, it is also a good idea to have many hotels that you can rotate, so you're not constantly using the same hotel or will have other options of the hotel is fully booked.

Train the hotel management and front desk staff on domestic violence, confidentiality, and privacy. Before placing survivors in a hotel, ask if it would be possible to train the hotel management and front desk supervisors on domestic violence to help them recognize if an abusive individual uses social engineering or other tactics to discover if the survivor is staying at the hotel. Most hotels have security staff, so include their staff in DV 101 and confidentiality trainings. Some hotels might have privacy protocols for certain guests (often for celebrities, elected officials, or well-known guests), in which their staff are not allowed to disclose any information about that particular guest. If a hotel has a protocol of flagging hotel guests as "high privacy," it may be possible to use the same protocol for the survivor, if it is not dangerous to the survivor by doing so.

Depending on how large the hotel is, it might not be necessary to inform the entire staff that someone in a particular room is a DV survivor. Talk to the hotel and come up with a solution that is most comfortable for all parties involved, including the survivor. Some survivors may not want anyone to know that they are staying there for safety or domestic violence reasons and that preference should trump other considerations. It's also possible to communicate the need for rooms for individuals who are "working" with your organization without identifying whether the person is an employee, a consultant, or a survivor receiving services.

Even if the extended staff isn't informed of the reasons for the high security/privacy requirement around a particular guest, have conversations with hotel management about ensuring that their staff maintains their guests' privacy. Be aware that even innocuous comments, such as: "That Sudanese woman with her five kids are so loud! And they ran through 10 towels in just one day!" can be revealing depending on the community.

Develop a payment process with the hotel. Come up with a payment process that works for the hotel so the survivor doesn't have to pay for the hotel when she or he gets there. Some agencies have developed a voucher system, where the program gives the survivor a voucher to give to the hotel, and the hotel bills the program afterwards. Some programs have set up a pre-payment system where they pre-pay the hotel over the phone before the survivor gets there. Other programs give the survivor a pre-paid debit card to use to pay for the hotel.



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Allow the survivor to check in under a pseudonym and without an ID. Many hotels ask for credit card and ID when guests check in. Ask the hotel to allow the survivors to check in without an ID and under a pseudonym. If a survivor's real name gets entered into the hotel database, it may be possible that someone else may be able to access that information or that the information may be inadvertently be passed on to the abuser by a well-meaning front desk staff.

Ask for flexibility in which rooms survivors are placed. Depending on the size of the hotel, your community, and other factors, you might want to have the ability to ask for flexibility in which rooms survivors are placed. For example, you don't want survivors to be in a specific set of rooms since that may, over time, reveal that there is something special about those guests. You also may not want survivors that you are working with to be in rooms next to each other or on the same floor. Some survivors, for safety reasons, may prefer to be close to an emergency exit, on the first floor, or near the front desk.

Come up with extenuating circumstances protocols with the hotel. In the event that there is an issue with the survivors' room or stay, ask the hotel to contact you first. That will give you the opportunity to talk to the survivor before the hotel takes any steps.

Survivor Safety Tips

Check in with the survivor about safety and privacy. Talk to the survivor about the hotel you are using and whether that hotel is acceptable in terms of safety and privacy. It may be that someone the survivor knows works at the hotel or near the hotel location. If the program is located in a small community, the chances that someone the survivor or abuser knows might work there are higher. In some cases, you may want to avoid hotels that the survivor has stayed at before, since that may be information that the abuser knows.

Go over any expectations with the survivor. Living in a hotel is different than in a shelter, so talk to the survivor about what to expect. Some things you might want to go over with the survivor may include ordering room service or charging incidentals to the room. (If you are bringing food to the survivor or if the survivor needs to get their own food, be sure to choose a hotel that has a refrigerator.) Some hotels have a limit on how many people can stay in a room, so make sure you know how many people will be in the room with the survivor. In some cases, you might have to get two adjoining rooms.

Check in with the survivor often and make sure that the survivor has a way to reach out to you in case she or he needs anything. Staying in a hotel, surrounded by strangers might feel incredibly isolating.

Go through standard safety and privacy planning. Just like if the survivor is staying at an emergency shelter, talk to the survivor about safety planning. If concealing the location is important, make sure you go through strategies of concealing one's location, including using the blocked features on a phone before making phone calls, using an online proxy or anonymizer to conceal the internet location, or discussing potential tracking of the survivor's vehicle. Just like a shelter, you may also want to talk to the survivor about not disclosing the location as a location that the shelter uses.

For more information on relocation, privacy and safety, visit www.nnedv.org/safetynetdocs for some of Safety Net's other resources.