



Safety & Privacy Considerations When Using Hotels as Emergency Shelter Stay

NNEDV

Some domestic violence shelters may use hotels or motels for overflow when their emergency shelters are full. When using hotels or motels for victims of domestic violence, programs have to take extra precautions around safety, privacy and confidentiality. When survivors stay at a hotel or motel, the shelter staff cannot control who enter or leave the hotel or the possibility that the survivor's location may be revealed by others. This discusses 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. 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 a 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 high 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 for the same protocol or flag be entered into the hotel database for the survivor, if it is not dangerous to the survivor by doing so.

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.

Depending on how large the hotel is, it might not be necessary to inform the entire staff, from wait staff to maids 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 you, the survivor and the hotel. Some survivors may not want anyone to know that they are staying there for safety or domestic violence reasons; that preference should trump other considerations.

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 set up pre-payment system where they pre-pay the hotel over the phone before the survivor gets there. Some 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 you 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 may not want survivors that you are working with to be in rooms next to each other or on the same floor.

Come up with extenuating circumstances protocols with the hotel. In the event that there is a problem with the survivor, 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. Programs in larger areas will have many hotels to choose from, while programs in more isolated areas may only have a few hotels or motels to choose from. Moreover, if the program is located in a small community, the chances that someone the survivor or abuser might know is higher. In some cases, you may want to avoid hotels that the survivor has stayed at before, since that may be something 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 your internet location, or 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 an overflow emergency shelter location. For more information on relocation, privacy and safety, visit www.nnedv.org/safetynetdocs for some of Safety Net's other resources.