

# Voluntary Services Model

## Frequently Asked Questions

“The challenge of integrating the kind of voluntary accountability described... is making sure that participation is truly voluntary, and not coerced or reluctantly agreed to by survivors willing to consent to any conditions because they feel they have no other decent alternative to homelessness or to returning to an abusive situation.”

-The American Institutes for Research, 2016

This FAQ addresses frequently asked questions from anti-trafficking housing providers regarding implementing a voluntary services model in shelter and housing programs. It offers information, strategies, and resources to empower your organization in assessing and improving structures and policies while placing survivor autonomy at the forefront. Utilizing this resource allows you to expand your knowledge and access additional resources specifically tailored to the common questions faced by housing providers serving human trafficking survivors.

### What is the voluntary services approach?

The voluntary services approach focuses on providing trauma-informed, culturally responsive, and person-centered services that prioritize the choice, autonomy, and right to self-determination of the person receiving services. This model was created in direct response to survivors who indicated that common practices in housing provision felt punitive. In 2007, the Missouri Coalition Against Domestic & Sexual Violence created the Shelter Rules Project, a chance for shelter and domestic violence programs to examine and decrease rules. Participating shelters found that removing or reducing excessive rules and coercive practices shifts the power back to the survivors they serve and aids in creating relationships based on supporting survivors in achieving their vision for their lives.

The response to implementing a voluntary services approach in other settings is beneficial for survivors and staff. Nnawulezi et al. (2018) found that “Qualitative results revealed that low-barrier and voluntary service was guided by cultural values of justice and access, encouraged survivor-centered practices among staff, and were believed to promote survivor autonomy. Quantitative results suggested that when survivors perceived they had a choice to engage in program services or meet with an advocate, their empowerment increased.”

The voluntary services approach is most successful when service providers are able to recognize the strengths of those they serve; create the space for voice and choice, and prioritize collaboration and mutuality over cooperation and compliance. When staff work as allies, who assist survivors with their goals rather than solely as “providers,” the voluntary services approach promotes relationship building (National Network to End Domestic Violence, 2017).

“...the possibility of a different approach, one focused more on advocacy and less on rules.”  
-Missouri Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence, 2020

## **How do we begin the process of shifting practices toward a voluntary services approach?**

A policy and procedure review is an excellent opportunity to begin looking at your program and assessing the rules and expectations of survivors. One place to begin is evaluating whether your policies promote survivor autonomy, and the choices individuals have to engage with services. When reviewing the current policies or practices you have in place, determine why they are in place. Next, evaluate the program's current methods of collecting, reviewing, and incorporating participant feedback. It is crucial to include and center the voices and experiences of those most impacted by the program's policies and practices. Then, consider how and where you might blend established *and* creative approaches that promote transparency and empowerment, allowing survivors to determine how little or how much they want to engage in offered services.

We recognize that some programs may need time to shift their services to voluntary. If this is the case, we invite you to think of a policy that, on one end, is entirely voluntary and, on the other end, is completely restrictive. Is there some middle ground where your programming can feel comfortable? There may be areas that cannot be voluntary, but are there others where you can encourage choice and allow the survivor to identify what works best for them? For example, case management is a service many programs offer. If you require that a survivor engages with a case manager, can the survivor determine the frequency of meetings and check-ins? Can they also choose the modality (phone, text, in-person)? Think about the choices you can offer and see if, within a required policy, there is any flexibility to offer individuals choices, increasing and supporting survivors' self-determination.

## **Our organization has some requirements that do not reflect the voluntary services approach. How do we navigate this contradiction?**

Organizations often have many different funding streams, roles, and regulations supporting successful service longevity. At times it can be difficult for organizations and programs to understand a voluntary services approach can exist on a spectrum. It takes intentional time and commitment to reevaluate the "how" and "why" of policies and practices continuously. The first recommendation is to thoroughly examine the requirements you have in place and work to understand your program, funder, licensing, and state restrictions entirely. We have found that organizations sometimes think certain items or policies are required when they are not. For example, all Office of Victims of Crimes (OVC), Office for Violence Against Women (OVW), and Family Violence Prevention and Services Act (FVPSA) funding require that adult survivor services are voluntary. Therefore, a survivor's shelter stay or rental subsidy should not be dependent upon participating in services.

If survivors must engage in certain aspects of your program, it is important to be transparent with program participants about those guidelines and requirements. Additionally, while program requirements may be in place, we recommend you evaluate how you can change or enhance how you offer the services. For example, rather than offering one option, offer a menu of services and allow the person to pick services they believe will be beneficial for them. The best practice for delivering trauma-informed services is spending more time building rapport and less time documenting and filling out forms. Continue to evaluate how your program offers services, using feedback from those being provided services, and continually align services to be trauma-informed and culturally responsive.

## Is it okay to provide housing and not require individuals to participate in additional services?

Housing is a service, so you are already assisting with a critical need. Many programs worry that if they only provide rental assistance support, survivors will not achieve their goals; however, survivors' goals may change, and they are in the best position to decide what they need. As you walk alongside and build rapport with program participants, they may describe action steps that they are already taking and identify ways that your program offerings fit into their plans.

The voluntary services approach does not require engagement in unwanted services; therefore, if survivors are not participating, they are not violating policies or “rules”. Programs may *offer* a variety of wrap-around supports for survivors to select which will be helpful. It is possible that programs may not offer something survivors want or that realistically meets their needs. In that case, we need to inquire about what services are missing, and how they would like to engage in services.

Listen and take action when survivors express their thoughts and ideas. For example, if you only offer talk therapy, there may be individuals who prefer something different – see if your program can connect with different modalities of services. Don't be afraid to ask program participants what they would like changed. Additionally, consider how available and accessible programming is for survivors with busy work schedules, children, transportation difficulties, disabilities, and language access needs.

## How do the Housing First approach and voluntary services work together?

“Housing First is a philosophy that values flexibility, individualized supports, client choice, and autonomy. It never has been housing only, and it never should be (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2019).

Voluntary services are deeply rooted in Housing First, where we recognize that an individual's basic needs, such as food and housing, must be met to start working on any personal goals (job searching, budgeting, etc.) that they want to set. Once housing is established and stable, individuals can begin thinking about their vision for their lives and identify how the program can be supportive.



## **How does a program train staff on a voluntary services approach?**

To support the successful implementation of a voluntary services approach, training, trauma-informed supervision, and feedback are crucial aspects to support management and direct service staff in learning a new approach in organization and program operations. As programs seek to implement a voluntary services approach, we recommend drawing upon research and resources on voluntary services. The materials listed in the resource list will be helpful for you to reference and explore further. Additionally, to operate in line with the voluntary services approach, we recommend being transparent with staff about upcoming changes, sharing and being transparent about the reasons leading up to this change, sharing information and resources early on, and collecting feedback from staff at all levels about these changes.

## **Does the voluntary services approach only apply to adults?**

No. You may be providing services to individual, unaccompanied, or transitional aged youth who can build resiliency factors through voluntary services approaches. “Resilience is better than bubble wrap because it is about developing internal strength rather than relying on an external shield” (Ginsburg, 2018). There are a variety of resilience or protective factors that can be fostered through programming. For example, when we focus on advocacy and relationship building, youth can more easily avoid isolation by making social connections. Practicing voluntary services, where appropriate, also allows youth to try new things, build new skills, gain confidence in their decisions, learn new coping strategies, and increase their control over their own lives. The more trust you build, the more opportunities you’ll have to discuss service options with them to figure out what might fit into their life plans.

For youth serving programs with justifiable mandatory requirements, a shared decision making model should be used to provide minors with agency in determining a course of action (Office for Victims of Crime, 2022). This model includes discussions on options, risks, and benefits; exploring core values and beliefs; and developing preferences based on increased awareness of possible benefits and harm (Sahl & Knoepke, 2018). The results of this strategy would include that youth are informed, able to get their questions and concerns discussed, and express their choices.

The Sanctuary Model is another example of a set of strategies to build trauma informed and resiliency practices into residential settings. It involved community commitments to nonviolence, learning, communication, social responsibilities, growth, and change. “The Sanctuary Model has constructed an acronym, SELF, which stands for safety, emotion management, loss and future. These four components are the organizing framework for treatment planning, community conversations and collaborative decision-making, and allow providers to focus on the most important aspects of helping people heal from trauma in a simple and accessible way” (The Sanctuary Institute, 2022). The model is unique, in that it helps programs weave-in daily trauma informed practices to promote youth and staff healing.

## **How does a program write voluntary policies?**

When writing or revising policies, try to remove language that implies or signifies required participation. Explain all of the available services and add language stating that services are voluntary. Perpetrators prohibited survivors from making their own choices, so it is vital for survivors to have the safety and autonomy to make their own decisions within our programs. If you feel conflicted while reviewing your policies and program parameters, examine why they were created. The program may have always operated in a particular way, making change seem difficult. Another possibility is that a policy was developed as a reaction to a past event or situation that occurred, and the intention is to prevent it from happening again. Examine the policy and consider who is being centered, and who is most impacted when this practice is enforced. Then consider the impact of enforcement. Through this assessment, you can determine who the policy or practice benefits, and who it may unintentionally harm. As discussed previously, collecting feedback on policies from survivors and centering your considerations on those who are most impacted by the policies is part of developing and implementing equitable policies and practices. Considering why we do certain things is always helpful in evaluating whether they are necessary and if practices can be shifted or eliminated.

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**It takes continuous intentional time and commitment to reevaluate the “how” and “why” of policies and practices.**

Please contact Freedom Network USA to request additional training and technical assistance support. We take a collaborative approach to help troubleshoot any concerns about voluntary service, connect you with other service providers that may have experienced challenges and success in implementing this approach, and prepare tailored training for you and your colleagues' needs.

# References and Resources

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