



National Resource Center on Domestic Violence

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND THE HOLIDAYS: WHAT'S COOKING?

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE GUIDANCE

NOVEMBER 2012

With the approaching holiday season, questions may arise about how to appropriately respond to the food-related needs of survivors in shelter and how to manage excess food donations. The NRC DV Technical Assistance Team offers the following guidance.

For the past few years, the NRC DV has released [Technical Assistance Guidance](#) to the field in preparation for the holidays, defined here as the time period beginning the week of Thanksgiving through New Year's Day. Research on the prevalence of domestic violence during the holidays continues to be limited and inconclusive. For example, a 2005 study found that police incident reports of domestic violence are higher than the normal daily average on New Year's Eve and New Year's Day, with New Year's Day averaging 2.7 times more incidents of domestic violence than the normal daily average.¹ On the other hand, information on the number of calls received by the [National Domestic Violence Hotline \(NDVH\)](#)² for the past *eight* years indicates that the number of calls drops dramatically during the Holidays, including on New Year's Eve and New Year's Day (see **Effect of the Holidays on Calls to the Hotline**, pg. 7 for additional information).

Whether domestic violence programs experience an increase or decrease in the number of survivors accessing services during the holidays, it is likely that there will be particular opportunities and challenges to be considered by programs as they work with survivors and their families during the holiday season. Last year's [Technical Assistance Guidance \(2011\)](#) addressed the need for additional emotional support and safety planning with survivors during the holidays. Considerations for making services more supportive and accessible to different populations were provided, as well as guidance related to managing the influx of volunteers during the busy holiday season. This year's Technical Assistance Guidance is intended to help advocates respond more appropriately to the food-related needs of survivors in shelter during the holidays, as well as provide recommendations for managing excess food that may be donated to programs during this time of the year.

Responding to the Food-Related Needs of Survivors in Shelter

Food nourishes body and spirit. In addition to meeting our biological and nutritional needs, certain food can help improve our mood or help us feel connected to our families and cultural heritage. Food can also allow loved ones to spend quality time together in the kitchen and around the table.

"Our staff does whatever it takes to help victims live a life free from fear of violence. They work on weekends to take survivors to their jobs and pick up donated meals so the residents have warm food on the table. They continue working after hours so they can have time to meet with survivors to help them find stability as quickly as possible." – [Georgia Advocate \(DV Counts 2010, NNEDV\)](#)

¹ Vasquez, S. P., Stohr, M. K., Purkiss, M. (2005). Intimate partner violence incidence and characteristics: Idaho NIBRS 1995 to 2001 data. *Criminal Justice Policy Review*, 16(1), 99-114.

² NDVH provides a very different data source than is used in the other study, which examines law enforcement statistics. NDVH call data reflect individuals reaching out on a toll-free helpline for assistance, including victims, friends and family, and less frequently, offenders. Also, data analyzed by the two sources are from different time periods.

At a communal space such as a domestic violence shelter, kitchens are spaces for social interaction, and access to food may reduce feelings of family instability. Cooking food together may help shelter residents bond and apply or develop essential life skills. During the holidays, food can be a means through which individuals and families express and celebrate their unique culture and traditions. The following suggestions can help programs ensure that food selection, preparation, and sharing during the holiday season are inclusive and empowering experiences for survivors and their children. Of course, many of these suggestions are applicable year-round.

Meeting Food Needs. Despite scarce resources, domestic violence programs across the country provide life-saving services and supports, including providing food for shelter residents, who are likely to be *food insecure*³ due to poverty, abuser control of family resources, disrupted mealtimes, eating disorders resulting from trauma, and more. Shelters meet the food related needs of residents in a variety of ways, including relying on food banks and helping residents access public assistance benefits such as Food Stamps and WIC. Some shelters employ very resourceful strategies, including growing their own gardens (see **Growing a Food Garden**) or partnering with local church groups or restaurant owners who provide prepared meals every week or at special occasions.

During the holiday season, local businesses and community groups may be more inclined to help those in need. A local restaurant may be willing to donate gift cards to shelter residents so that they can treat themselves to a holiday meal. The holiday season is an opportune time to reach out and host a food drive, for example, as community members are more likely to donate to charities. Because shelters often operate with a small staff, and residents are often required to rotate cooking and cleaning duties, food-related assistance is not limited to food or money donations. A local culinary school may be able to send a chef to prepare a large meal at the shelter while residents take the time to do their holiday shopping, wrap gifts, or spend quality time with their children.

Attending to Cultural Diversity & Dietary Restrictions. When preparing their grocery or holiday wish list, programs should strive for inclusiveness, keeping in mind that survivors from different cultural and religious backgrounds may observe the holidays differently (or not observe them at all). By attending to residents' unique holiday traditions, advocates can help survivors and their children feel respected and included as part of the communal environment. To begin with, recognition that not every family wishes to eat turkey on the holidays is a must. Main prized dishes on many holiday tables include, but are not limited to, ham, venison, prime rib, and "turducken." Of critical importance is to also note that many cultures and religions follow specific dietary laws. For example, Kosher law dictates what foods can and cannot be eaten by Jewish people and how those foods must be prepared and consumed. For example, the flesh of birds and mammals cannot be eaten with dairy, and all blood must be drained from the meat or broiled out of it before it is eaten. For Muslims, unlawful or prohibited foods include swine/pork and its by-products, as well as animals improperly slaughtered or dead before slaughtering.

It is important to note as well that attending to diversity goes beyond creating menus for specific ethnic or religious groups. A broad definition of culture involves other markers such as social class, sexual orientation, lifestyle choices and disability, just to name a few. Likewise, a broad range of issues – ranging from religious or social concerns to medical conditions and health considerations – affects people's food choices. That being said, the holiday menu should also accommodate the needs of a resident with a disability who may require

³ It is estimated that 1 in 6 people in the US are "food insecure." Note that among the more than [50 million](#) food insecure people in the U.S., nearly 17 million are children (see current data and further discussion at [Feeding America](#)). Broadly speaking, the term "food insecurity" means limited or uncertain access to enough nutritious and safe foods to lead an active and healthy life. For additional information, see [An Introduction to the Basic Concepts of Food Security](#).

pureed or soft-textured food. For a mother and her children whose dietary practice is veganism, a tofurkey may need to be added to the menu. Advocates should take a count of how many residents will be at the shelter for the holidays and consult them about their dietary needs (including food allergies). Fortunately, many different food manufacturers now cater to specific dietary restrictions (for example, gluten-free, non-dairy, vegan, low sulfites, organic, etc.). As a good practice, advocates can research and learn about diverse dietary restrictions and holiday traditions so they can be prepared to support victims and survivors from different populations. Finally, residents who do not observe any holidays should also be invited to the table and to provide suggestions and assistance.

Involving Residents in Decision-Making. Leading up to the holiday season, shelter staff should provide a forum for residents to make suggestions to the grocery list and holiday menu, as well as seek input regarding food preparation, child-related food needs, shopping, cleaning and decorating, among others tasks. How many residents will be staying in shelter on Christmas Eve? Who is doing the cooking for the shelter holiday celebration? What are some of the dietary needs not being addressed by the menu? These and other questions require input from residents, whose thoughts and ideas can be gathered during the shelter’s house meeting or by using a “suggestion box.” The practice of involving residents in decision-making should not, however, be limited to the holiday season. Instead, it should be a reflection of the agency’s overall and ongoing commitment to use survivors’ feedback to ensure that services and supports meet the needs of those using the program.

Minimizing Conflict and Empowering Survivors. In communal shelters, the kitchen can be a space where connection and bonding can be created. At the same time, this environment can also be a space where conflict and challenges emerge among residents and/or between staff and residents. Common challenges and sources of conflict include maintaining cleanliness, access to food and resources, and different cultural and personal approaches to food, among others. By examining their physical space, policies and procedures, shelter programs can help to minimize conflicts and create welcoming and accessible environments for survivors and their children. The [Building Dignity](#) website by the [Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence](#) explores design strategies for easing communal living, increasing harmony, supporting parenting in shelter and ensuring safety. For example, multiple ovens and cooktops allow different residents to access these appliances simultaneously. Unlocked food storage allows advocates to focus on advocacy, rather than monitoring residents’ access to food. Dining nooks allow families to gather for their meals while controlling noise and distraction levels. The guide [How the Earth Didn’t Fly Into the Sun: Missouri’s Project to Reduce Rules in Domestic Violence Shelters](#) by the [Missouri Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence](#) offers guidance for creating environments where survivors can reclaim their autonomy and feel secure without excessive and punitive rules. For example, having residents volunteer to cook a Thanksgiving dinner is more empowering and supportive than imposing the task on residents who may not feel comfortable in their ability to do so.

Being Child-Friendly. Accessible and inclusive food selection and preparation also includes considering the needs of children, who are a large proportion of domestic violence shelter residents, as well as of food insecure individuals. Research indicates that as many as 68% of survivors in domestic violence shelters are accompanied by their minor children.⁴ And, among the more than [50 million](#) food insecure people in the U.S., nearly 17 million are children.⁵ The holiday menu must include items that are appetizing and child-friendly, and substitutes for foods that are not safe or suitable for younger children should be offered. For example, seeds, nuts, raw vegetables and large chunks of meat are unsafe for young children as these foods could cause a

⁴ Lyon, E., Lane, S., & Menard, A. (2008). *Meeting Survivors’ needs: A multi-state study of domestic violence shelter experiences*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice. Available at http://www.vawnet.org/Assoc_Files_VAWnet/MeetingSurvivorsNeeds-FullReport.pdf.

⁵ Feeding America. (2012, September). *USDA Report Shows That Food Insecurity Remains High; More Than 50 Million Americans Face The Reality of Hunger*. Chicago, IL. Available at <http://feedingamerica.org/press-room/press-releases/usda-food-insecurity-2012.aspx>.

possible choking hazard. For menu ideas, shelter workers can consult child-friendly holiday recipes that can be easily found online (see [Holiday Recipes Your Kids Will Actually Eat](#)). The importance of ensuring child safety in kitchen areas, as well as of consulting parents about any [food allergies](#) that their children may have, cannot be overstated. As shelter workers and residents prepare the holiday table, attention should also be given to offering child-sized eating utensils and arranging for appropriate child seating. Moreover, including children in the process of decorating the shelter and setting the table, among other child-friendly jobs, is a great way to involve children in the holiday spirit and teach them about proper etiquette, family-style dining, appropriate dinner conversation, and holiday rituals.

Diversifying the Pantry and Avoiding Food Surpluses. Besides turkey, there are other food items that may be donated in abundance to shelters during the holidays. These include canned staples such as peas and corn, soups and stews, rice and beans, peanut butter and cereal. If possible, shelters should plan a wish list before potential donations are delivered. By being creative and involving residents, programs can jazz up their pantries by including less common items such as canned collard greens or asparagus, dried whole grains, as well as a variety of seeds, herbs and spices. Fresh fruit and vegetables are unfortunately not predominant in shelters, so efforts must be made to address this gap. Partnering with local farmers or supermarkets and growing a food garden are good strategies for increasing a shelter's supply of produce. In addition to avoiding a surplus of certain food items, a well-planned grocery and wish list are more likely to address diverse food preferences and nutritional needs.

Moreover, the program may be in need of pots and pans, paper products, utensils, and/or dishes in order to prepare and serve a nice holiday meal to shelter residents; or containers, foil and freezer bags may be needed to store extra food for later use. In preparation for the holidays, it may be useful for shelter staff to do an inventory of the available kitchen and tableware supplies and add any needed items to their holiday wish list. Shelters can post the wish list on their websites and develop a 1 -page flyer that can be readily faxed or emailed upon request. Both the website and the flyer should include pertinent details such delivery location (usually the main office site, not the shelter), dates/times that staff will be available to accept donations, and a contact person for questions.

Growing a Food Garden. Some domestic violence shelters have the space and sunshine necessary to grow a garden. Some programs across the country have learned the benefits of growing a vegetable and fruit garden to supplement the food supply at the shelter and to provide a healthier and more nutritious diet to survivors and their children. By properly harvesting and storing the fresh vegetables and fruit from their garden, shelter staff and residents may be able to enjoy nutritious food all year-round. In addition to helping meet a shelter's food needs, gardening has been shown to be a therapeutic and educational experience for shelter workers and residents alike, also providing esthetic, economic, social and cultural benefits to domestic violence programs. Despite the challenges and hard work that can be associated with growing an edible garden and harvesting and storing the produce, these experiences can help staff, volunteers, survivors and their children to learn and/or apply valuable marketable skills. There may be a local gardening course or group of [Master Gardeners](#) that will volunteer to assume responsibility for routine upkeep of the garden and be willing to teach residents basic gardening skills. Mothers and children can spend fun, quality time working together on the garden. During the holiday season, staff and residents may be able to reap the financial benefits of their garden by selling canned or jarred vegetables and fruit at the local market. Children can be involved in the process by helping paint and decorate the jars with festive holiday themes. Information available from [Project GROW](#) and the [Gardening Guide](#) by the White House's *Let's Move!* initiative can provide guidance to shelter programs considering growing an edible garden. Helpful information on home canning is available from [The Complete USDA Guide to Home Canning](#).

"We like to get fresh vegetable, otherwise, we have to eat frozen since they are the only fresh vegetables that the shelter gets." –
[Resident at a shelter with an edible garden](#)
(Center for Food and Justice, 2002)

Providing Health Education. Due to competing demands and limited resources, healthy food and nutrition education have not been a common activity in typical shelter programs. Shelter staff themselves are often in need of education and training on this area. During the holidays and beyond, domestic violence programs have an opportunity to provide health education to shelter residents and staff, including information on [nutrition](#), meal planning, and food safety. A local community college offering food service or nutrition courses may be a valuable resource for the shelter. A nutrition instructor can be made available by the college to facilitate a healthy food workshop for staff and residents at the shelter facility. A short discussion on food safety and food-borne illnesses can be introduced to the next house meeting's agenda. Reader-friendly [brochures](#) and [handouts](#) can be displayed in kitchens and common areas for workers' and residents' reference. Information and educational materials can be freely obtained from the [Department of Agriculture \(USDA\)](#) and the [U.S. Food and Drug Administration \(FDA\)](#), among many others. During the holiday season, examples of useful food-related information to be disseminated at the shelter include how to safely cook a turkey ([Turkey Basics: Safe Cooking](#)) and tips for creating healthy celebration events ([Make Celebrations Fun, Healthy & Active](#)).

Managing the Surplus of Food Donations

While some shelters may experience extreme food insecurity throughout the year, including during the holidays, others may find themselves with a good problem to have – a surplus of food due to generous donations of groceries and cooked food from the local community. As discussed in the previous section, planning grocery and holiday wish lists in preparation for the holiday season may help programs avoid food surpluses and have a well-balanced pantry. However, programs have limited control over how much and what type of material goods they will receive at any time. In the spirit of optimism for a successful holiday food drive, the following are recommendations to address a potential surplus of food donations.

Reaching Out to Survivors Not in Shelter. One of the best ways for domestic violence programs to manage their holiday surplus of food is to share it with survivors who are not currently living in shelter. These include former clients, survivors living in transitional housing, and/or survivors receiving other non-residential domestic violence services. Of course, reaching out to survivors during the holiday season for the purpose of donating food should be in alignment with overall follow-up procedures in place at the program. As a [best practice](#), follow-up services and supports must keep survivors' safety at front and center, and can only be provided if the survivor has previously agreed to follow-up contacts. A shelter's ability to reach out to former residents or other non-residents will therefore depend on each survivor's individual circumstances, including whether she/he is presently in a safe situation. The following are some recommendations around sharing surplus food with non-shelter residents during the holidays, keeping in mind recipients' safety concerns and the overall efficiency of the donation process.

- Considering that the shelter has established follow-up relationships with a number of survivors – that is, as long as contact is authorized and does not jeopardize the survivor's safety – staff can reach out to these individuals via phone, email or regular mail to inquire whether they would like to be placed on the holiday surplus food list.
- As food recipients are identified, staff should develop a chart/list including information such as the survivor's name and address, number of people in the household, food items to be donated, estimated delivery or pick up time (if former residents are allowed to pick up donations at the shelter), and staff/volunteer assigned to deliver the food. It is also very important to ask the survivor ahead of time about any [food allergies](#) that she/he and/or their children may have and to record that information on the chart. Needless to say, the names and addresses of survivors should be kept confidential, which means that the chart/list should not be shared with shelter residents or other third parties.
- The shelter will need insulated containers or coolers for keeping food at appropriate temperatures, and other necessary carrying or handling tools. Any containers or utensils that the shelter would like to

get back should be labeled as such. In that case, a pick-up or delivery date for these items also needs to be coordinated with the recipient upon delivery of the food. Such information should be logged to the chart for future reference and tracking purposes.

- If shelter staff is delivering the food to the survivor's door, the shelter will need a reliable vehicle and at least one dedicated staff or volunteer to drive and make the deliveries. She or he should have directions to the survivor's house (or other safe location), as well as a phone number, in case she/he gets lost in the way or the delivery needs to be canceled or delayed for some reason. In the event that recipients are coming to the shelter to pick up their food packages, a staff person or volunteer needs to have a copy of the chart/list and be available to handout the food packages to the respective recipients.
- Properly packing and transporting the food is crucial to ensure its safety and quality. Basic [guidelines](#) for preventing food from spoiling or becoming dangerous during packing and transporting are provided by the [FDA](#).
- Remember: 'Tis always the season for kindness! Consider including a note or card to the survivor wishing her/him a peaceful holiday season and a prosperous new year. If possible, consider also including age-appropriate toys or treats if there are children in the home.

Making Use of Food Preservation Methods. If sufficient refrigerator and freezer space is available at the shelter, storing extra food or leftovers for later use will come in handy during times when food donations are not as abundant. According to the [FDA](#), there are limits to how long you can safely store foods in the refrigerator. In the freezer, foods will stay safe *indefinitely*, although their quality and taste may be affected. [Guidelines](#) for ensuring that refrigerated or frozen foods are stored safely can be found on the [FDA](#) website and should be consulted by shelter staff and residents, if needed. A reader-friendly [refrigerator and freezer storage chart](#) can be taped on to kitchen walls and refrigerator doors to serve as a quick reference for shelter workers and residents. Refrigeration and freezing are not, however, the only options for home food preservation. Other methods include, but are not limited to, canning, curing, and fermenting. The [National Center for Home Food Preservation](#) is a source for current research-based recommendations for most methods of home food preservation.

Planning for After-Holiday Meals. With an abundance of food items coming into shelter during the holidays, the opportunity to assess current supply and plan for the first few weeks of meals following the holiday season is presented. Shelter staff should assess which items are appropriate for storage (see above) and which may be best to prepare and serve within the first few weeks of the New Year. Many families celebrate the start of a new year with a celebratory dinner. Sharing a meal together could be a great way to set the tone for how families and staff interact within the shelter environment. Recognizing the start of a new year can be another opportunity for families to discuss the ritual of setting goals or resolutions for the year, as well as learn about diverse, cultural traditions related to food as part of a new year's celebration. For instance, many families will partake in foods that symbolize luck, happiness, health and prosperity for the year on New Year's Eve or on New Year's Day (see [American New Year Food Traditions](#)).

Conclusion

A wealth of information is readily available online to support domestic violence programs in their continued efforts to provide sufficient, safe, nutritious, and culturally-appropriate food to survivors in shelters, during the holiday season and beyond. A variety of resources and materials are hyperlinked throughout this Guidance and can be consulted by staff and residents for reference and skill development purposes.

Effect of the Holidays on Calls to the Hotline

These statistics represent the experience of the National Domestic Violence Hotline only. Representatives of state and local programs, along with representatives of law enforcement and medical staff, may have different seasonal experiences with victims and survivors of domestic violence.

Table A: Thanksgiving Holidays—Number of National Calls to the Hotline, 2004-2011

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
The Week of Thanksgiving	2270	2312	3151	3285	3487	3546	4741	4080
	2660	2863	3724	3829	4090	4189	5257	5110
The Week After	2779	2752	3596	3759	3831	4102	5432	5244
	2660	2863	3724	3829	4090	4189	5257	5110
Thanksgiving Day	146	166	239	290	332	341	376	344
	380	409	532	547	584	598	751	730

Number at the Top of the Cell = Holiday Number of Calls

Number at the Bottom of the Cell = Average Number of Calls Received in a Typical Week or Day

Table B: Christmas and New Year’s Holidays—Number of National Calls to the Hotline, 2004-2011

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Dec 15 to Jan 1 “The Holidays”	5660	5625	7403	8540	10094	8367	12259	9958
	6840	7362	9846	9846	10512	10764	13518	13140
Jan 2 to Jan 15	5935	5956	7563	8415	9413	7511	10702	9161
	5320	5726	7658	7658	8176	8372	10514	10220
Christmas Eve	192	184	234	370	452	304	470	420
	380	409	547	547	584	598	751	730
Christmas Day	135	160	208	270	394	258	374	359
	380	409	547	547	584	598	751	730
New Years Eve	276	243	283	523	669	422	569	398
	380	409	547	547	584	598	751	730
New Years Day	260	236	342	428	508	341	604	429
	380	409	547	547	584	598	751	730

Number at the Top of the Cell = Holiday Number of Calls

Number at the Bottom of the Cell = Average Number of Calls Received in a Typical Week or Day

The NRCDV welcomes your input. If you have any comments or additional information to provide, please contact our Technical Assistance Team at nrcdvTA@nrcdv.org.