



National Resource Center on Domestic Violence

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND THE HOLIDAYS: CULTURAL SENSITIVITY DURING THE HOLIDAY SEASON

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE GUIDANCE

DECEMBER 2013

With the holiday season upon us, questions may arise about the increase of domestic violence during this time and how to appropriately meet the needs of survivors and advocates working in shelter through the holiday season. This time can present both opportunities and challenges. Below are several issues to consider as you work with survivors and their families during the holiday season. Guidance from the Capacity Building and Education Team follows.

For the past few years, the NRCDV has released [Technical Assistance Guidance](#) to the field during the holidays, **defined here as the time period beginning the week of Thanksgiving through New Year's Day**. Although there continues to be a common perception that domestic violence increases during the holidays, available research on such a link is still limited and inconclusive. For the past 9 years, the number of calls received by the [National Domestic Violence Hotline \(NDVH\)](#)¹ have dropped dramatically during the holidays (see [Effect of the Holidays on Calls to the Hotline](#), pg. 6 for additional information).

Although some survivors may choose not to leave their home during this time to keep the peace, or to not disturb long held family, religious or cultural traditions, many families find themselves in hiding, spending the holidays in safe shelter. In turn, many shelter advocates find themselves working through the holidays—away from their families and loved ones—to ensure that emergency shelter and hotline services are provided on a 24-hour/7 days per week basis. While some advocates may choose to work during this time, many are required to work and do not have the option to take leave. Whether domestic violence programs experience an increase or decrease in the number of survivors *accessing* services during the holidays, programs need to provide particular attention and support to survivors and shelter staff during this stressful time.

“BUT IT’S CHRISTMAS!” - CULTURAL SENSITIVITY DURING THE HOLIDAYS

The experience of being in shelter (for both survivors and advocates) can be particularly challenging and potentially isolating during the holidays—a time when many families are celebrating together and society at large appears festive, happy, cheerful, and in the spirit of giving. Despite the mainstreaming of Christmas-related observances, decorations, events, and sentiment, it is a Christian-based holiday celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ. While many still celebrate and participate in the observance, not everyone practices Christianity or observes religious traditions related to Christmas. This TA Guidance underscores the need for sensitivity throughout the Christmas-based holiday season and provides ideas about how programs can offer specific support to both shelter residents and program staff. We are particularly grateful to Margaret Hobart at the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence (WSCADV), and our other reviewers, for their critical advice and feedback.

¹ NDVH call data reflect individuals reaching out on a toll-free helpline for assistance, including victims, friends and family, and less frequently, offenders.

By solely focusing on Christmas during this holiday season, secular programs may cultivate feelings of isolation, alienation and being “othered” for some shelter residents and staff who practice a religion other than Christianity, who identify as atheist or agnostic, or who simply do not wish to celebrate Christmas. It is also important to note that not all religions have holidays that occur in the second half of December or that observe January 1st as the start of the New Year. For example, those who practice Judaism refer to the “high holy days” or “high holidays” in reference to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, which are the most important holidays in that faith. Although roughly three-quarters of Buddhists (76%) and Hindus (73%) celebrate Christmas², the most joyful and important Hindu holidays do not occur in late December, and this is also true for Islam. One concrete way to support survivors’ emotional safety is by not assuming that all residents want to celebrate or participate in Christmas-related activities.

The goal of this TA Guidance is not to squelch the enthusiasm of residents who do and have traditionally celebrated Christmas, but rather to consider how the actions of others, and program staff in particular, may marginalize or ignore the needs of non-Christian residents and those that do not celebrate Christmas. Keep in mind that there is no one-size-fits-all strategy for residents spending the holiday season in shelter and away from their extended family, community and other support systems. Offering a range of supportive programming can increase the chances that residents will have a positive shelter experience. The following are practical, cost-effective interventions, which may be easily adopted at any shelter program.

PROGRAM POLICIES

- **Create clear policies on how holidays, particularly those with a religious basis such as Christmas, are observed in the shelter.** Offices, counseling spaces and other work areas should be kept religiously neutral in the interest of being welcoming to everyone. Programs should have a clear policy that is shared with all residents and considers the needs of every resident seeking safe shelter and support. Asking residents in a group setting about their preferences is strongly discouraged. Jewish, Muslim and other survivors should not be made to feel responsible in voting for or against another survivor’s desire to celebrate or observe Christmas in the shelter.
- **Limit the presence of Christmas in shared residential spaces.** Rather than putting up a large Christmas tree in the shelter, an option to decorating for the holidays may be limited to resident’s individual rooms. That way, any religious, cultural or traditional holiday may be observed in a way that encourages survivor autonomy, cultural expression and religious requirements around eating, prayers, or other observances. More guidance on shelter design and its connection to victim advocacy values of empowerment can be found at [Building Dignity](#), a project of the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence that explores design strategies for domestic violence emergency housing.
- **Be aware of the impact on children residing in shelter.** Each year, thousands of children accompany their mothers into domestic violence shelters. In just one day in 2012, domestic violence programs across the country served 24,783 children.³ Of those, 18,968 children found refuge in an emergency shelter or transitional housing program. Many children in shelter during the holidays will have particularly strong emotions about it—*anxiety about being away from home or otherwise breaking family tradition, divided loyalties to and feelings about the abusive parent, possible feelings of being left out if their family’s religious traditions do not include observance of Christmas, potential excitement about Christmas, receiving or giving gifts, and a vast array of other feelings and concerns.*

² Pew Research Religion & Public Life Project. (2012, July). *Asian Americans: A Mosaic of Faith*. Washington, DC. See [Holiday Celebrations](#).

³ National Network to End Domestic Violence. (2013). *Domestic Violence Counts 2012. A 24-hour census of domestic violence shelters and services*. Washington, DC.

Shelter programs can play a crucial role in helping support and encourage healthy relationships between survivors and their children to build or nurture relationships that may have been sabotaged by abuser behaviors.⁴

- **Allow residents to share personal beliefs, observances and traditions in their own time in their own way.** Not all residents will feel safe or will want to share about their personal beliefs, observances and traditions in a mixed group amongst shelter residents and staff. Some survivors may have very valid concerns and fears that others will view them as odd, exotic and strange, or may simply not even try to understand or learn about their ways and customs.

Consider how requiring shelter residents to participate in activities where these types of exchanges are expected may in fact create stress or strife within the shelter. Some residents may fear discrimination from shelter staff and it is not fair to expect people in crisis to carry that fear or responsibility. Work hard to ensure that participation is truly voluntary.

- **At the same time, recognize that some residents may be genuinely interested in learning new ways of celebrating and observing the holidays.** This may include survivors who may have had to separate completely from their communities due to imminent and ongoing safety concerns, who may be immigrants, or who are using this time to begin new traditions. Programs should strive to be culturally competent by seeking to include everyone without excluding most. Communicate and build meaningful relationships with residents to understand their unique needs and the needs of their families during their time in shelter. Being immersed in the dominant culture of Christmas and Christianity during this time can be challenging. For some however, it may be a welcome time of cheer, festive celebration and good will towards all.

PROGRAM SERVICES

- **Allow time for respite.** The holidays can be emotionally and physically draining, even without the added layer of experiencing domestic violence, and even more so when families are separated from their home and community. Shelters should allow time for respite, quiet talks and other forms of relaxation, such as walking, yoga and meditation. Limiting the number of house meetings and prioritizing time to relax can help decrease the stress and frustration residents may experience during the holiday season.
- **Provide one-on-one counseling.** A survey of services provided at 90 domestic violence programs across the country found that the majority of survivors (88.5%) responded that they wanted “information about counseling options.”⁵ That being said, the holidays are a great time to offer varied opportunities for individual counseling. Although both individual and group counseling can be effective for working with survivors, the holidays might bring out issues that residents may not want to share during a group session.

Furthermore, residents may be expected to participate in other group activities during this time (such as holiday events at their child’s school, their place of worship, or at the workplace), and they may need more one-on-one time with counselors to process their feelings and experiences.

⁴ Baker, L. & Cunningham, A. (2004). *Helping Children Thrive/Supporting Woman Abuse Survivors as Mothers: A Resource to Support Parenting*. Centre for Children and Families in the Justice System of the London Family Court Clinic.

⁵ Lyon, E., Lane, S., & Menard, A. (2008). *Meeting survivors’ needs: A multi-state study of domestic violence shelter experiences*. Final report prepared for the U.S. National Institute of Justice. Harrisburg, PA: NRC DV.

- **Emphasize safety planning.** The importance of safety planning around the holidays should not be underestimated. Advocates can help keep the season safe for survivors by sharing with them some holiday specific safety tips, including starting new holiday routines, meeting family and friends in new locations unknown to the abusive partner, avoiding shopping areas and/or holiday parades and events where survivors may anticipate seeing their abusers, and using a P.O. Box (or no return address at all) if sending holidays cards.
- **Support spiritual needs.** Research suggests that spirituality and religious involvement can promote greater psychological wellbeing for domestic violence survivors, including greater quality of life and decreased depression.⁶ Oftentimes domestic violence shelter staff may avoid discussions about spirituality with shelter residents. Reasons for this include concerns about proselytizing⁷ (which is not allowed under most grants), as well as lack of staff time and resources, the personal nature of spirituality, the diversity of religious or spiritual beliefs among individuals, and apprehension around creating misunderstanding or intruding on a survivor's privacy.⁸

A study on the importance of spirituality in the lives of domestic violence survivors found that, for many women, their trust in a higher power and the support they receive from their faith community was integral to their healing.⁹ Of 151 women interviewed for this study, the majority (97%) noted that spirituality or God was a source of strength or comfort for them. This research, and years of practice, suggests that providing opportunities to find other who share the same spiritual beliefs can help survivors expand their support network.

At the same time, providing regular non-denominational or inter-faith spiritual healing or prayer groups, on a volunteer basis for participants, could be especially healing and powerful to many survivors. Appropriate clergy or lay leaders from the faith community could be brought in to facilitate such groups. Other strategies include providing space within shelters designated for prayer or meditation and/or providing transportation for residents to attend religious services.

WAYS TO SUPPORT SHELTER STAFF DURING THE HOLIDAYS

In domestic violence programs, staff run the risk of experiencing burnout or vicarious trauma due to repeated exposure to the cruelty of abusers, the heightened awareness of vulnerability and the fragility of life, and/or due to the shattered assumptions about basic beliefs in our world for safety, security, trust, and justice. During the holidays these conditions can worsen given that many shelter staff are away from their families due to work schedules and related obligations. While it is important that staff identify and try to prevent compassion fatigue or burnout, programs should address this as a workplace concern.

Although victim advocacy work is rewarding and meaningful to many advocates, program leadership can proactively develop appropriate administrative practices that are supportive to the needs of their staff. On an ongoing basis, all new and seasoned staff can be supported in taking care of themselves emotionally and physically.

⁶ Gillum, T., L., Sullivan, C., M., & Bybee, D., I. (2006). The importance of spirituality in the lives of domestic violence survivors. *Violence Against Women*, 12(3), 240-250.

⁷ Proselytizing is defined as trying to persuade or recruit people to join a religion, cause, or group.

⁸ Edmund, D., S., & Bland, P., J. (2011). *Real Tools: Responding To Multi-Abuse Trauma: A Tool Kit To Help Advocates And Community Partners Better Serve People With Multiple Issues*. Alaska Network on Domestic and Sexual Assault. Juneau, AK.

⁹ Gillum, T. L., Sullivan, C. M., & Bybee, D. I. (2006). The importance of spirituality in the lives of domestic violence survivors. *Violence Against Women*, 12(3), 240-250.

Providing a supportive work environment begins with organizations offering staff the time, space and resources to explore their own personal struggles, and possible triggers, that may take place during the workday. Advocates can be encouraged to seek out appropriate counseling resources as needed. Domestic violence programs can develop strategies to help advocates cope with intense or negative feelings and reactions to being required to work during the holiday season. Here are few suggestions drawn from programs around the country:

- **Be sensitive to advocate workload, especially during the holidays.** Understand that overloading a single staff person can place them at higher risk for burnout. Discuss and plan as a team to help staff manage and share the increased workload that may come during the holiday season, such as use and management of volunteers.
- **Take care of and demonstrate appreciation for those staff that work overnight shifts in the shelter,** particularly in the event that they experience inclement weather and are forced to remain at the shelter for an extended period of time without any relief or help. For example, give staff a “*We Appreciate You*” care package with extra toiletries, snacks, warm socks, magazines, gift cards or gas cards to help ease the burden during inclement weather.
- **Frequently rotate staff working the hotline and allow breaks for focused self-care.** Organization leaders can create a self-care space within the shelter or hotline area that allows for staff to decompress and recharge after experiencing a number of calls. Items within the space may include a notebook for writing/reading positive affirmations, books of motivational sayings and poems, coloring books or sketch pads with coloring utensils, room for pillows or cushions to be used in quiet meditation, chocolate and other tasty treats, and/or postcards or notecards that can be written for other advocates as means of appreciation and encouragement. Staff may also be allowed time to process with supervisors and/or more seasoned support staff working the hotline during this time.
- **Ensure that staff are allowed sufficient time off to be with their families and loved ones at important holiday events and work to be respectful of cultural, traditional or religious observances.** This may mean that shelter/program leadership allow for flexible or alternative schedules during this time and that supervisors or volunteers are bought in to help cover shifts at the shelter to meet the needs of frontline advocates.
- **Plan staff and resident activities that are enjoyable** such as family game nights, involving the family in making decorations for different holidays and décor of resident rooms, and practicing group exercise, mediation or yoga.

It is important that advocates use this time of year to increase public awareness that domestic violence does not stop during the holidays, and that although the holidays may bring additional stressors, abuse and physical violence is always an intentional behavior. It is important for advocates to provide compassionate, culturally relevant services and create a welcoming atmosphere for diverse populations and families that are in need all throughout the year. For a deeper understanding of issues that may arise during this time, read previous NRC DV TA Guidance on DV & the Holidays:

- 2011 [Domestic Violence and the Holidays: Considerations for Survivors from Specific Populations](#). Provides guidance to expand the organizational capacity of shelters during the holidays, including tips for making services more supportive and accessible to different populations.
- 2012 [Domestic Violence and the Holidays: What’s Cooking?](#) Focuses on the food related needs of survivors in shelter and is a great resource for programs seeking to encourage healthy eating.

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, 2004-2012

| | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 |
|---------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| The Week of Thanksgiving | 2270 | 2312 | 3151 | 3285 | 3487 | 3546 | 4741 | 4080 | 4060 |
| | 2660 | 2863 | 3724 | 3829 | 4090 | 4189 | 5257 | 5110 | 5075 |
| The Week After | 2779 | 2752 | 3596 | 3759 | 3831 | 4102 | 5432 | 5244 | 5207 |
| | 2660 | 2863 | 3724 | 3829 | 4090 | 4189 | 5257 | 5110 | 5075 |
| Thanksgiving Day | 146 | 166 | 239 | 290 | 332 | 341 | 376 | 344 | 340 |
| | 380 | 409 | 532 | 547 | 584 | 598 | 751 | 730 | 725 |

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, 2004-2012

| | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 |
|--|------|------|------|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Dec 15 to Jan 1 "The Holidays" | 5660 | 5625 | 7403 | 8540 | 10094 | 8367 | 12259 | 9958 | 9788 |
| | 6840 | 7362 | 9846 | 9846 | 10512 | 10764 | 13518 | 13140 | 13050 |
| Jan 2 to Jan 15 | 5935 | 5956 | 7563 | 8415 | 9413 | 7511 | 10702 | 9161 | 9001 |
| | 5320 | 5726 | 7658 | 7658 | 8176 | 8372 | 10514 | 10220 | 10150 |
| Christmas Eve | 192 | 184 | 234 | 370 | 452 | 304 | 470 | 420 | 421 |
| | 380 | 409 | 547 | 547 | 584 | 598 | 751 | 730 | 725 |
| Christmas Day | 135 | 160 | 208 | 270 | 394 | 258 | 374 | 359 | 355 |
| | 380 | 409 | 547 | 547 | 584 | 598 | 751 | 730 | 725 |
| New Years Eve | 276 | 243 | 283 | 523 | 669 | 422 | 569 | 398 | 395 |
| | 380 | 409 | 547 | 547 | 584 | 598 | 751 | 730 | 725 |
| New Years Day | 260 | 236 | 342 | 428 | 508 | 341 | 604 | 429 | 499 |
| | 380 | 409 | 547 | 547 | 584 | 598 | 751 | 730 | 725 |

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 NRC DV welcomes your input. If you have any comments or additional information to provide, please contact our Capacity Building and Education Team at nrcdvTA@nrcdv.org.