

Staying Safer on the Streets

A safety planning discussion tool for sexual violence survivors experiencing homelessness.



520 SW Yamhill, Suite 200
Portland, OR 97204
503.274.5477

115 Broad Street, 3rd Floor
Boston, MA 02110
617.399.6720

www.victimrights.org

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About the Safety Planning Discussion Tool

Sexual violence¹ can result in immediate and long-lasting trauma that destabilizes survivors' lives and increases their chances of becoming or remaining homeless.² Individuals already experiencing homelessness are especially vulnerable to sexual violence—by friends, acquaintances, strangers, and those to whom they turn for help. Yet, although individuals experiencing homelessness face distressingly high rates of sexual violence, there is often little opportunity for these survivors and those who serve them to address the sexual violence and its impact on the survivors' lives. The attached tool, *Staying Safer on the Streets: A Safety Planning Discussion Tool for Survivors of Sexual Violence Experiencing Homelessness*, is designed to create a user-friendly framework for service providers to discuss safety with survivors experiencing homelessness, and:

1. Allow survivors experiencing homelessness to discuss their situation in a safe environment.
2. Create an opportunity for survivors to discuss their safety options and empower them to make the safest choices possible.
3. Construct a time and context in which we can suggest resources and alternative solutions that may be available.
4. Support survivors as they generate ideas and identify realistic, manageable steps they can take to achieve greater safety in their lives.
5. Assist and empower survivors experiencing homelessness in implementing their safety plan.

The tool is a general template designed for conducting safety planning with sexual violence survivors who are experiencing homelessness. Statistically, we know that many of these survivors have both experienced sexual violence in the recent or distant past and are also at risk for being assaulted in the future. That said, we know that this tool is not—and is not meant to be—comprehensive; it will not necessarily help assess, reduce, or prevent risk in every situation.

¹ For the purposes of this discussion tool, sexual violence is defined as any unwanted sexual act, including but not limited to touching, voyeurism, exhibitionism, sexual assault and/or rape, perpetrated against a person through force, coercion, or exploitation. Coercion includes, but is not limited to, intimidation, threats of physical harm, threats of deportation, turning an individual into law enforcement, or persuading someone to perform sexual acts in exchange for food, clothing, money, shelter, safety, etc.

² For a variety of reasons, some individuals prefer the term “houseless” to “homeless.” When safety planning, ask survivors which term they prefer and use that term.

The tool is presented as a two-page chart that lists nine areas where survivors may need to create or improve safety in their lives (e.g., on the street, in transit, at school). It poses questions that give survivors the opportunity to identify potential threats to their safety (“What’s not working”), to assess the risk (“When is it worse?” and “When is it better/what IS working?”), and to identify what or who can help them be safer. Two additional questions are included to generate ideas about little and big “fixes” (i.e., solutions) to feeling and being safer. Little fixes might include relatively simple measures that can be taken in the short term, while big fixes might take more time, involve multiple steps, and require additional effort.

An example of a completed chart is included with this discussion guide. The completed chart is a sample to be used for educational purposes only; it does not capture every safety risk a survivor might face, nor does it include every solution that might be available.

Privacy and Confidentiality

Most sexual assault survivors are tremendously concerned about their privacy and may choose not to tell anyone about the assault(s), even if this decision limits their access to advocacy, legal assistance, housing, or other help. For instance, survivors experiencing homelessness may decide not to report an assault to police, friends, family, or service providers because they are afraid they will not be believed or will be blamed or punished for what they were doing at the time of the assault (e.g., drinking, using illegal drugs, loitering, sleeping in a public place, or trading sex acts for money, food, or shelter).³ In addition, survivors experiencing homelessness may feel unsafe talking about the assault as they may live, travel, be in a relationship with, or seek services in close proximity to the perpetrator(s). It is, therefore, important to discuss with survivors who will have access to the information they share with you. Strategize about how best to keep survivors’ information private and be prepared to refer survivors to a civil attorney who can discuss legal approaches to protecting victim privacy.

Before using this discussion tool, make sure you first discuss with survivors:

- your mandatory reporting obligations (i.e., whether you are a mandatory reporter of abuse of people with disabilities, older adults, and/or children) and under what circumstances you would be required to file a report;

³ This tool is not intended to encourage or discourage survivors to report crimes of sexual violence to law enforcement or other providers, but rather to focus time and attention on the safety of survivors. It may not always be in the best interest of the safety of survivors experiencing homelessness to reach out to law enforcement or other providers. Each survivor must decide this for him- or herself.

- whether your communications with the survivor are “privileged” (only certain relationships are privileged, such as attorney-client or therapist-patient; the extent of individual privileges vary, and, depending on the jurisdiction and the applicable state and federal laws, a victim’s communications with advocates may not be well-protected);
- their privacy concerns (i.e., what information they want to keep private and from whom);
- whether they have pending criminal or civil litigation⁴ concerns; and
- if applicable, an interpreter’s duty to keep information confidential.

Before safety planning with survivors, it may be useful to consult with your organization’s Executive Director or legal counsel about:

- steps you can take to ensure that your notes and records will not reveal identifying, damaging, or incriminating information about the survivor; and
- how you can best weigh the need for information to help you and the survivor assess and address the risk of harm against the risk that the information could be used against the survivor if disclosed in court or elsewhere.

Identifying and Managing Risks to Safety

Individuals experiencing homelessness are often forced to choose between two or more potentially unsafe or dangerous options, such as opting to sleep alone or with a person who provides “safety” on the street in exchange for sex acts or some other form of “currency.” This tool is intended to help survivors experiencing homelessness identify and work through safety concerns in distinct areas of their lives. Increased safety may be achieved by making minor or more significant changes in their lives, in essence “managing” risk to decrease the enormous dangers and vulnerability associated with homelessness. It is important to remember that, for varying reasons, some survivors will not choose to use the risk reduction ideas they discuss with you. Additionally, what felt safe when a survivor created her or his safety plan might not feel safe in the future. Moreover, survivors may experience sexual violence *even if* they follow their safety plans. In all instances, it is important to remind survivors that sexual assault is never their fault, and that you are available to help them discuss modifications to their safety plan as needed.

⁴ Your written notes and your testimony based on verbal conversations regarding a survivor’s mental health, contact with the perpetrator, or other disclosures can be subpoenaed by defense counsel in a civil or criminal case.

Emotional Safety

Managing threats to a survivor's emotional safety and wellbeing can be as important as addressing physical safety concerns. These concerns are often interrelated, and, likewise, a single solution may address both. For example, a survivor who is afraid for her physical safety while sleeping outside may experience increased anxiety and insomnia; finding housing may both promote safety and decrease the survivor's anxiety and insomnia.

Many survivors experience mental health conditions, such as depression, anxiety, or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Any pre-existing mental health conditions may be exacerbated by recurring or subsequent experiences of sexual violence. Sexual violence survivors may develop or escalate potentially unsafe coping mechanisms, including substance use, addictions, cutting/self-mutilation, eating disorders, or increased risk-taking behaviors. Survivors may isolate themselves from friends, family, and/or service providers—they may even feel unsafe in their own bodies. Individuals experiencing homelessness may already be isolated, feel vulnerable, or live in circumstances that compromise their physical and emotional safety. Experiencing sexual assault(s) while homeless can compound existing obstacles to survival and intensify feelings of hopelessness and isolation.

Consequently, this tool includes a row of questions addressing how survivors can be safer with their thoughts, which can include negative self-talk, suicidal ideation, and feelings of hopelessness and resignation. You may also wish to ask survivors how they are feeling, both mentally and physically, while talking with them about their thoughts, and support them as they generate ideas and propose steps they can take to achieve greater safety and well-being. Remember to inform survivors of any mandatory reporting obligations you have *before* asking about suicidality and other forms of self-harm or threats that you may have to report. If you do not feel comfortable or qualified to discuss emotional safety with survivors who are homeless, refer them to a sexual assault advocate or mental health professional that can assist.

Make sure to maintain an up-to-date list of local resources and services available to sexual assault survivors and homeless individuals. Ensure that the list includes services for survivors who may need culturally-specific resources, such as services specific to lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, or transgender (LGBT) individuals or teens and young adults (all of whom are at higher risk of homelessness when sexual violence is present). Be familiar with local resources so you can help survivors effectively access the services they need. If you lack the specialized training that would likely enhance safety planning with certain cultural groups, request training—or, if necessary, make a referral.

How to Use the Safety Planning Discussion Tool Chart

This tool is intended to create a user-friendly framework to discuss safety with survivors experiencing homelessness. It is recommended that you ask survivors' about their safety concerns the first time you meet. Then, depending on the needs and priorities of each individual client, it may be appropriate to use this tool immediately to further discuss safety or, if the client prefers, set a follow-up time to meet. Unfortunately, for many reasons particular to survivors experiencing homelessness, you may only have the opportunity to meet with clients once.⁵ As such, your first meeting may be their only opportunity to discuss their options in a safe environment.

The following guidelines will facilitate a successful discussion:

1. Show survivors the safety planning discussion tool before you begin the conversation about safety and explain the general purpose of a safety plan. (See *About the Safety Plan Discussion Tool* above.) It may be too time-consuming or overwhelming to address all of the issues presented in the discussion tool all at once. Let survivors know that you won't likely have time to cover all of the areas in one meeting, and ask them to pick a few of the areas on the left-hand column of the chart (e.g., "On the Streets," "With Technology," etc.) and then begin the discussion there. Address additional areas as time, victim priorities, and circumstances permit.
2. Determine if the survivor would like the information you discuss to be written on the chart or not. (See *Privacy and Confidentiality* above.) If the survivor wants the discussion written down, write a few key words that capture the essence of the survivor's response in each box on the chart so that it is easy to read, process, and remember. Alternatively, survivors may prefer to fill in the chart themselves. (See the attached completed sample discussion tool.) It may be advisable to leave survivor-identifying or perpetrator-identifying information off of the chart in case it is lost, stolen, or seen by others.
3. Make sure the conversation is *survivor-centered*, meaning the survivor's needs and ideas about how to create greater safety drive the conversation. Survivors know their lives best; it is our job as service providers to offer suggestions and resources and to support survivors to make the best choices possible given their circumstances. Be sure your body language reflects that you are engaged and present for the survivor. Focusing your

⁵ For example, survivors may lack transportation or phones, they may leave our service area; and/or they may be so overwhelmed by taking care of basic needs such as food and shelter that they do not return for a follow-up meeting.

attention down on what you are writing instead of on survivors' faces may disconnect you from them and cause them to feel reluctant to share important information.

4. Suggest resources and alternative solutions that may be available and provide referrals if survivors are interested.
5. Take breaks as needed. Discussing safety with individuals experiencing homelessness may trigger anxiety, fear, and other intense emotions (for both them and you). Talk with survivors about what they plan to do immediately after meeting with you. Ask if they would like you to help them identify safe emotional coping skills before they leave. Suggestions for safe emotional coping skills include attending a support group (like AA), talking to a safe friend, eating a good meal, or reading an enjoyable book.
6. Ask survivors to review the safety plan before you complete the discussion. Make sure they understand all of the information written on the chart. Determine if they feel safe carrying a copy of their safety plan with them. If not, discuss alternatives. Review the "next steps" that survivors plan to take independently, those they plan to take with your assistance, and those you will take, such as making referrals to other agencies. Acknowledge that it may be challenging to follow through with the safety plan and remind them that they are welcome to discuss their safety concerns with you again, even if they ultimately do not follow the safety plan you discussed.
7. Safety planning is an on-going process, not a one-time conversation. Circumstances change, especially for those experiencing homelessness. If you meet with survivors again, check in to see if updates to the plan are needed, or if they have any new safety concerns they would like to discuss.

Conclusion

An effective safety plan empowers survivors to reclaim a sense of safety and security by addressing immediate safety needs and outlining strategies to help reduce future harm. The goal is to help survivors be as safe as possible given their current life circumstances. You are in a unique position to create an environment in which survivors experiencing homelessness feel safe enough to share their fears and supported enough to take steps to minimize risk of future harm.

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A Sample Safety Planning Discussion Tool for Sexual Violence Survivors Experiencing Homelessness

How can I be safer:																					
Where I sleep?		Have to trade sex with J.R. for a place to sleep	When J.R. has been drinking	When is it worse?	When J.R. is sober and others are around	What are little "fixes?"	Stay with a friend if J.R. has been drinking	Find a safe place to live (get an apartment)	List of resources for shelter and housing assistance	Homeless service agency	Meet with case manager at homeless service agency										
On the street?		Sexually harassed in the food center line	At night—dinnertime and afterward	When is it better/What is working?	During the day—when there are more staff around	Find somewhere else to eat	Stay away from food center at night; leave after dinner	Food stamps; list of other places to get free food	Homeless service agency, Department of Human Services (DHS)	Ask homeless service agency for help; go to DHS office											
In transit?		J.R. follows me and harasses me when I'm riding the bus	When I am alone	When I am with my friends	Ride bus with friends or sit near bus driver	Get a Sexual Assault Protection Order to keep J.R. away from me	Knowing my rights; Sexual Assault Protection Order	Sexual assault legal advocate or lawyer	Call Crisis Line and talk to advocate; get referral and talk to legal services lawyer												
At work?		Supervisor demands sex from me—says he will fire me if I refuse	When I work late shifts alone	When I work day shifts with a different supervisor	Talk to manager; switch to day shift	Filing a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission	Understanding what my rights are	Employment lawyer	Get referral and call legal services lawyer												



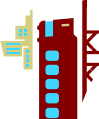

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How can I be safer:	What's not working?	When is it worse?	When is it better/What IS working?	What are little "fixes?"	What are big "fixes?"	What will help?	Who can help?	Next steps
At school? 	Classmate T.C. sexually assaulted me at a study group	When I am in class with T.C. and when I'm on campus	Weekends when I'm not on campus	Not going to class this week and talking to my professor	Get T.C. transferred out of class or expelled; criminal prosecution	Knowing my rights; Sexual Assault Protection Order; school disciplines T.C.	Women's Resource Center on campus; lawyer	Meet with Women's Resource Center; call legal services lawyer
Other places? 	Father has been sexually abusive since I was 10 years old	When I am alone with my father	When my sister is around	Don't go to the house when Dad is there	Civil protection order (sexual assault, D.V.); criminal prosecution	Knowing what my legal rights are	Victim rights lawyer or legal advocate; law enforcement	Call legal services lawyer or advocate to discuss criminal law/ protection orders
With technology? 	Classmate T.C. continues to text and Facebook me after assault	When I am on Facebook or use my phone	When I ignore my phone and don't check Facebook	Changing privacy settings on Facebook; changing phone number	Civil protection orders (stalking or sexual assault)	Getting a new phone; learning how to be more safe with technology	Sexual assault advocate; lawyer	Meet with advocate to discuss protection orders and technology
With my feelings? 	Anxiety about everything; depression from past abuse	At night when I'm trying to go to sleep	When I have my anti-anxiety medication	Staying busy; talking to my friends; calling 24-hour crisis line	Counseling; medication	Speaking with a counselor; getting my prescription filled	Homeless service agency; mental health provider; campus health center	Call county health department; call campus health center
With drugs and/or alcohol? 	Drinking and using a lot; trading sex for drugs	When I am really anxious; when I don't have money to pay for drugs	When I have money	Trade something other than sex for drugs	Examine the role that alcohol/drugs play in my life	Attend an AA/NA meeting; learn about treatment options	AA/NA; detox treatment centers; homeless service agency	Go to an AA/NA meeting on Friday





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How can I be safer:	What's not working?	When is it worse?	When is it better/ What is working?	What are little "fixes?"	What are big "fixes?"	What will help?	Who can help?	Next steps
Where I sleep? 								
On the street? 								
In transit? 								
At work? 								

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How can I be safer:	What's not working?	When is it worse?	When is it better/What IS working?	What are little "fixes?"	What are big "fixes?"	What will help?	Who can help?	Next steps
At school? 								
Other places? 								
With technology? 								
With my feelings? 								
With drugs and/or alcohol? 