

Youth Outreach Guiding Principles

Philosophy and Practice of Harm Reduction: Harm Reduction focuses not on further stigmatizing already socially stigmatized behaviors, but on considering how to help best address and reduce the harm caused by those behaviors. Our Harm Reduction philosophy centers on “meeting people where they are” and providing a wide array of education, options, and supplies to support each person’s choices and self-care efforts. Harm Reduction requires that you suspend your judgment toward staff and participants, and learn to regard stigmatized behaviors objectively and apart from the context of social constructs and biases.

Gold Standard for Customer Service: We regard our participants as “customers” of our programs, and we serve our customers the way we like to be served. As consumers, they are entitled to professional, courteous attention and high-quality goods and service from our staff, interns, and volunteers regardless of:

- how often or how rarely they visit us
- whether or not they participate in (or refuse) any specific services or supplies
- the fact that our services and supplies are free

Anti-Oppression Framework: As supporters and allies of disenfranchised and marginalized young people, we seek to understand and acknowledge the ways that we as staff, interns, and volunteers may be privileged and/or empowered by virtue of our race, ethnicity, gender or gender expression, sexual orientation, age, socioeconomic status, education, citizenship, physical ability, religious identity, preferred language, or other factor. We are committed to forging new egalitarian patterns and paradigms which support, empower, and celebrate youth’s individual and collective voice and power.

“Trauma-Informed” Approach: We recognize that the large majority of youth we serve have experienced trauma in a wide range of forms, including from homelessness alone. This has profound implications for their development, and must inform our efforts to support healing and a sense of “safe space.” We affirm that very few of our youth have circumstances safe and stable enough to thoroughly manage the process of disclosure and healing, so we respect the coping mechanisms youth employ and resist temptations to push them to disclose or process painful events or vulnerable subjects until they choose to, and unless we can orchestrate comprehensive care and support for them.

“Low-Threshold Engagement” Model: Our goal is to remove as many barriers to service as possible. We create quick, seamless access to supplies and services without undue delay and process, minimize paperwork and other traditional trappings, and emphasize grass-roots, informal, personal and relational ways of connecting and relating with people.

Strengths-Based, Empowerment-Oriented Assessment and Intervention Style: We regard our participants as the “experts” in their own lives and circumstances, and we recognize and support the skills and resourcefulness they bring. We address goals that they advance for themselves, and refrain from following paternalistic, ageist, “rescue” paradigms seen in other social service work. We try not to do things for clients that they could do for

themselves, but encourage and support youth leadership and consumer input throughout our programming.

LGBTQ Competency: It is imperative to create a culture of competency and safety surrounding sexuality and gender identity/presentation, especially considering that a large portion of youth who are homeless identify asLGBTand/orQ. This includes asking (rather than assuming) what pronouns someone uses, honoring one’s chosen name, self-educating, educating staff, and keeping up with terms for and ways of talking about issues or topics related to LGBTQ identities and culture. It also includes recognizing the institutional nature of oppression and interrupting trans and homophobic behavior whenever you see it happening and it is safe to do so.

Confidentiality Commitment: One of our most critical standards is our commitment to guarding our participants’ privacy. Information about a client is never shared with any person outside The Night Ministry without consent of the client. We preserve participants’ privacy by:

- never discussing private or detailed information or “business” with a participant within the hearing of other participants or outside parties, unless the client expressly asks us to include someone (“Would you like to step aside now or meet more privately later on to talk about this more?”)
- never acknowledging that we know any client, or that a participant may engage in or be present in the program at any time (“I can’t confirm that I know that person, but if I encounter someone by that name, I’ll pass along your message.”)
- working separately with youth who are in partnerships as much as possible (treating each person as an individual with personal goals, rather than a “package deal”).
- never discussing with a client their participation in any program or program site other than the one in which the client is currently present, and not approaching clients outside of program spaces unless or until they initiate this (NOT saying, “Hey, it was fun playing spades with you today at BYC” or “I saw your room at the shelter today,” etc.)
- never discussing one client with another (You might say, “It sounds like you feel unsure about trusting _____,” but NOT “yeah, you gotta be careful because _____ usually screws up opportunities like this.”)
- never discussing with a client any info learned any other way than directly through the client (NOT, “I heard you got bad news....”)
- being particularly careful and discreet about issues around HIV testing and services, trauma-related disclosures, gender-transitioning issues and services, new resources a client acquires, etc.